

JEEVADHARA

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PROVERBIAL LITERATURE

BIBLICAL PROVERBS
AND MALAYALAM PROVERBS

G. Kaniarakath

PROVERBS IN INDIAN RELIGIOUS CULTURE

Thomas Manickam

BIBLICAL PROVERBS
GENRES AND FEATURES

Paul Kalluveettil

JESUS USED IN THE GOSPEL
ACCORDING TO MATTHEW

Raja Rao

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The Word of God

PROVERBIAL LITERATURE

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Editorial

Man's History begins with his quest for wisdom — the possession of knowledge which will provide him with the status of the Deity. The symbolic expression of Gen 2:17, "the knowledge of good and evil" may refer to the divine prerogative which makes one the judge, authority and norm of what is right and what is wrong. God enjoys this wisdom which sets him above the limits of finiteness and temporality. Thus the Deity possesses total life and eternal bliss. This primordial quest for perennial felicity is an innate quality which forms part of the beingness of the humans. The Hindu sages strive to shed the cyclic shackles of *karma* and to attain the blissful knowledge of *aham Brahmsmi*. How to create, conserve and enjoy a life of prosperity, peace and prestige? Modern man is in search of this precious pearl of knowledge. He is no more interested in the mere post-mortem mode of happiness. Life is to be enjoyed, not there and then, but here and now. Does this life exhibit the terrestrial and temporal dimensions of the eschatological bliss? Does the Bible postulate such a holistic approach? Can we find in the secular the face of the sacred?

Wisdom literature of the Bible positively responds to these questions and eagerly comes to the defence of the aspirations of modern man. It posits a "secular" spirituality which upholds man as the apex of the universe. Together with the psalmist this anthropocentric theology harps on the human eulogies.

"You made him a little lower than the gods
and crowned him with glory and honour.
You made him ruler over the works of your hands;
You put everything under his feet." (Ps 8:5-6)

This endeared and enthroned son is entrusted with the cosmos

in order to concelebrate the creation and solemnize the Kingdom of God. An aesthetic and exhilarating cosmic vision is the recurring rhyme of the anthropo-theology of the Wisdom thinkers. Here emerges an exuberant portrait of man in his seemingly inexhaustive strength and daring dynamism. In man we trust — exclaim the Biblical sages.

The Wisdom observations, instructions, speeches and poems are generally known by the Hebrew name *mashal*. The Book of Proverbs encapsulates a substantial portion of this material. Qohelet and Job also exhibit this literary genre. Both the Historical and Prophetic literature attests to the importance and wide use of this form in the Israelite culture. The New Testament authors also employed Proverbs for their didactic purpose. Jesus himself appears as a sage and teacher in the Gospels. People were amazed at his pedagogic skill and terse and pithy style as he used aphorism genres like sayings, commands and prohibitions, parables, wisdom speeches and warnings. Moreover, Jesus becomes the incarnated Wisdom (I Cor 1:24), and the words of the Book of Wisdom are fulfilled in him:

“...a breath of the power of God,
and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty;
.....
a reflection of eternal light
a spotless mirror of the working of God
and an image of his goodness.” (Wis 7:25-26)

This Biblical issue of *Jeevadhara* presents a preliminary study of the Proverbial literature in Biblical and Indian traditions. Thomas Manickom, in his general introduction to the Proverbs in the Indian religious culture, brings out some salient features of the Indian Proverbs: their literary types and characteristics, Sitz im Leben, secular, sociological and religious perspectives etc. As to their theological insights, since they are scattered throughout the entire *Sruti* and *Smṛti*, hardly any uniformity can be noted. But generally speaking pre-upanishadic proverbs, except some of the vedic mahavakyas, reveal polytheistic traits, while those of the upanishadic period have clearly advaitic trends. In short, he says, the Indian Proverbs

convey the legacy of a long-lived past, yet to be re-enacted by us in an equally livable future. A corresponding Biblical study brings into focus the literary genres and general features of the Old Testament Proverbs. The reader can draw striking similarities between these two traditions. Still the investigations remain in the preliminary stage which do not warrant comprehensive and conclusive comparisons. This fact calls for closer co-operation and interdisciplinary research projects between Indologists and Bible scholars. But sages warn us that

"Hope deferred makes the heart sick,
but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life" (Prov. 13:12).

Accordingly, this issue includes a tentative comparative study which covers only the modest field of Keralite culture. George Kaniarakom tries to make a comparative study of Biblical proverbs and Malayalam proverbs. After describing the characteristics of both kinds of proverbs he arrays a rather long and assorted list of Malayalam proverbs, some directly derived from the Bible, others inspired by it and still others peculiar to Malayalam with parallels in the Bible. It is hoped that the process of enrichment of the vernacular by Biblical literature will continue, now that there are more than one translation of the Bible in Malayalam. It is hoped that this will provide the incentive for further investigations. Wisdom theology paves the foundation, orientation and goal for the Proverbial literature. Unfortunately an indepth study of the theological vision in Indian Proverbs is still to be materialized

Finally the portrait of Jesus as the Sage who employs Proverbial pedagogy will be very appealing in the Indian religious context. Raja Rao has gathered together all the Proverbs used by Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew and classified them into certain clear-cut patterns. He has also made a thematic classification under such heads as: God, Kingdom, Discipleship etc. so that one can have a glance at the amazing power of Jesus in making use of varied parables and proverbs and blending them with his new teaching. Looking at the ease with which Jesus integrates the existing proverbs and creates new ones

in difficult situations, it would seem that the life of every disciple could one day be proverbial.

The beatitude formula of Prov 4:13,18 will serve as an epilogue as well as a prologue to this biblical issue on Proverbial literature:

"Blessed is the man who finds Wisdom,
the man who gains understanding.
She is a tree of life to those who embrace her;
those who lay hold of her will be blessed."

Paul Kalluveetil.

Biblical Proverbs and Malayalam Proverbs

A Comparative Study

This is an attempt at a comparative study of the proverbs available in the Bible, both in the Old Testament and the New Testament, with those found in the South Indian language called Malayalam, an off-shoot of the ancient Dravidian language called Tamil with an enormous enrichment from Sanskrit. In the Bible we have the ancient languages Aramaic, Hebrew and Greek with a rich literature from the wise men, which includes proverbs, parables, sayings and riddles. Parables are our only concern here. Malayalam which is a relatively modern language, though possesses all these, is especially rich in proverbs drawn from Sanskrit and other Dravidian languages like Tamil, Kannada and Telugu¹.

The meaning of 'proverb' in the Bible and in Malayalam

The Hebrew word for proverb is *māsāl* which has the basic idea of similitude or likeness². Hence a kind of positive or negative comparison is suggested. Similarity and dissimilarity, unity and contrast are the two poles possible in a proverb in the biblical understanding. In Malayalam, however, a proverb is called *pazhamozhy* or *pazhanchollu*, both meaning an 'old saying'. Here the stress is on the time factor, while in the Bible the style or the literary formulation is characteristic of a proverb.

Proverbs are literary capsules in which the life-vision of a people is consolidated in a few beautiful spicy words which one does not forget easily³. Proverbs contain the wisdom of ages, gathered from the experience of man from his socio-

religious, cultural, political and professional experiences. As new experiences continue, new proverbs also emerge from the new possibilities and dimensions of life and its problems. As we share in the same humanity and as many of our human concerns are similar, proverbs become easily at home in other cultures and many proverbs are found to be common in cultures supposed to be distant in time and space.

Some characteristics of the biblical proverbs

The Bible has taken a number of proverbs from the Canaanite and Egyptian literature because of their universal and practical appeal. Egyptian influence on Israel was very pervasive up to the Hellenistic period. From the Egyptian literature we have a lot of what are called the Instructions given by a king or an officer to his son or successor. The best known among such is the *Instruction of Amen-em-ope* which has passages very similar to that of the Proverbs 22:17-24, 22⁴. The Canaanite proverbs with their pithy observation of life also should have influenced the biblical proverbs. This does not mean that Israel was a mere receiver; it had its own wisdom literature which became concrete also in proverbs. King Solomon was an embodiment of wisdom to whom are also attributed a number of wise sayings or proverbs (1 Kings 4:32-33; Prov 25:1). In the Old Testament we have proverbial sayings in Qoheleth, Ben Sirach and the Wisdom of Solomon almost to the full while they are scattered in the other books of the O.T. and the N.T.

Some proverbs make a comparison: "The tongue of the righteous is choice silver" (Prov 10:20). Some make a comparison with a contrast: "A wise son makes a glad father, but a foolish son is a sorrow to his mother" (Prov 10:1). A third group can be a taunt or a scoffing derision:

"woe to him who heaps up what is not his own —
for how long — and loads himself with pledges!" (Habakkuk 2:6).

Finally there are the riddles: "Out of the eater came something to eat. Out of the strong came something sweet" (Judges 14:14). In this category we have also what are called the numerical proverbs/puzzles: "Three things are never satisfied; four never say, "Enough": Sheol, the barren woman, the earth ever

thirsty for water, and the fire which never says, "Enough" (Prov 30:15b-16). These are different ways of commanding, instructing, counselling and persuading people.

The proverbs are a method of giving practical wisdom with literary gusto and so they are poetic and abound in parallelism that make them beautiful and unforgettable. One may think of antithetic, synonymous and progressive parallelism. Antithetic parallelism makes a contrast but stresses the positive and creative: "The memory of the righteous is a blessing, but the reputation of wicked men will rot" (Prov 10:7). There are in this category some also called the proverbs of comparative value as, "To get wisdom is better than gold" (Prov 16:8). In the synonymous parallelism two similar statements or facts are put side by side: "When words are many, transgression is not lacking" (Prov 10:19). In a progressive parallelism, the similitude is continued progressively:

Do not withhold discipline from a child;
If you beat him with a rod, he will not die.
If you beat him with the rod
You will save his life from Sheol (Prov 23:13-14).

Some characteristics of Malayalam proverbs

In Malayalam we do not have a collection of proverbs like the *Book of Proverbs* or *Ben Sirach*. Certainly there have been proverbs in circulation in spoken language from the very beginning of Malayalam as an independent language. As far as we know, only some two hundred years ago people began collecting proverbs and the first collection was made by a missionary called Padre Paulinos who gathered more than a hundred sayings in Malayalam with a Latin translation and published it from Rome in 1791 under the title, *Adagia Malabarica*. Besides the sayings, this book contained also some meaningful poetic lines. In 1845 Dr. Gundert published a *Pagham-cholmāla*, a Necklace of Proverbs thematically and with interpretations. It was in 1927 that the Malayalee Pailo Paul published 2500 proverbs with parallel English proverbs called *Malayalapazhanchollukal*, Malayalam Proverbs. There are also other important collections in modern times⁵ of which the latest is by Velayudhan Panickassery⁶.

Malayalam is very rich in proverbs as the latest collection of ten thousand sayings shows well. It can boast that it has almost all the sayings that are found in the Dravidian languages: Tamil, Telugu and Kannada, as also a lot from Sanskrit. Of course, these languages belong to the same family and hence the very same words are found written in different scripts. "Will the milk of a black cow be black?" is a saying found in all the four languages:

Pasu karuthālum palu karukumō? (Malayalam)

Pasu karupanō pālu karupamumo? (Tamil)

Ā kalu kappadare halu kappo? (Kannada)

Avulu nalupu aythe palu nalupa? (Telugu)

It is to be noted that a number of sayings in Malayalam do not have corresponding expressions in these languages, which means that it has many sayings typically its own. Malayalam has, besides, some Sanskrit proverbs without any alteration and which are intelligible to the educated normal people. Such are:

Vināśakālē vipareetha buddhi = At inopportune times,
counter intelligence.

Vidhyadhanam sarvadhanal = Knowledge is the
pradhanam supreme wealth.

In Malayalam too proverbs are poetic and different kinds of parallelism make the small sayings enjoyable and unforgettable. But an important aspect of these sayings is the alliteration and the resonance effected through the use of the short and long vowels instead of accentuations. A typical example for this beautiful literary quality may be found in the following proverb which is also a piece of practical wisdom experience:

Akathu kathiyum / purathu pathiyum
Inside sword / outside piety

Here the hypocritical expression of external piety is well contrasted with the internal wickedness represented by the sword. There is the double contrast in expression and meaning.

Malayalam is very rich in proverbs concerning religion, family life, agriculture, business, hunting, recreation; everything that teaches a lesson and makes one laugh and enjoy. Many of the proverbs are especially witty and even there are

long stories behind them. Narrating such stories is a pleasant and worth-while pastime.

Biblical proverbs in Malayalam

Though Christianity reached India with the Apostle Thomas (A. D. 52), according to a living and trustworthy tradition in the Malayalam speaking Malabar, the Bible came to be translated into Malayalam only some two hundred years ago. Of course, the ancient St. Thomas Christians had the Syriac *Peshitha* Bible and Western Christianity the *Vulgate* and the *King James Version*. The Syriac *Peshitha* and the Latin *Vulgate* were intelligible to the priests and a few others and the *King James* version was accessible to those who knew English. Anyhow, people were introduced into the literary and thought-world of the Bible long before they were available in the vernacular languages. Now excellent translations of the complete Bible are within reach of the common man. Naturally its ideas and literary niceties have influenced the Malayalam authors and their works. Here we may see some of the biblical proverbs that have enriched Malayalam directly as also those which have had some indirect influence. To be sure, we are not able to make an exhaustive study.

There are a number of biblical proverbs which have found a home in Malayalam without any change except for the language. 1) "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge" (Prov 1:1a; 9:10; cfr also 10:27; 14:26). This statement occurring almost at the beginning of the Book of Proverbs gives a religious colour to the quasi-secular character of practical wisdom. In Malayalam it is formulated as *Deivapēdi arrivinte uravu* which literally means, 'fear of God is the source of wisdom'. In the Bible fear of God is something far removed from terror or anxiety; it is the salvific feeling of love, esteem and fascination before the majesty of God. It gives one a humble and open attitude to the mystery of God and the mystery of man; man's creatureliness and complete dependence on God are acknowledged and accepted here. It leads to genuine knowledge and wisdom which is a blessing also on this earth. Related to this saying is the following one which follows immediately: 2) "Fools despise knowledge and wisdom" (Prov 1:7b). Its Malayalam version is more to the point: *Dushtanu cheviyil vēdamaka*, 'knowledge is not to be given into the ears

of the wicked'. Here the word 'veda' can mean religious knowledge which concerns the ultimate meaning of life on earth. This knowledge which is religious with practical consequences is the supreme knowledge and hence we have: 3) 'For wisdom is better than jewels, and all that you may desire cannot compare with her' (Prov 8:11). Malayalam has here a Sanskrit saying: *Vidhyāadhanam sarvadhanal pradhanam*, 'knowledge is the greatest wealth'. A truly wise man is a humble person; from *vidhya*, knowledge, comes *vinaya*, humility. Hence the Bible has: 4) "A prudent man conceals his knowledge, but fools proclaim their folly" (Prov 12:23). Malayalam has the idea a little bit differently: *Nirakudam thulumpilla, arakkudam thulumpum*, 'a full vessel does not spill out, a half-filled vessel spills out'. It is a matter of common observation that the wise are prudent and sparing in the use of words. Only one who is well disciplined and docile can attain genuine wisdom, and discipline is a must for a child. Hence we have: 5) "He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him" (Prov 13:24). Again we have, "Do not withdraw discipline from a child; if you beat him with a rod, he will not die" (Prov 23:13). In Malayalam we have: *Onneyullenkil ulakaku thallanam*, 'if there is only one (son) beat him with a wooden rod'.

The Ezekelian proverb, 'Like mother, like daughter' (16:44b) agrees verbatim: 6) *Ammayum makalum orupōle*. But Malayalam has some other expressions with other meanings. *Amma pulayadichiyeñkil makalum pulayadichi*, 'if the mother is a wayward woman, so also the daughter'. *Amma madu chadum, makal mathilu chadum, makalude makal gopuram chadum*, 'the mother will jump over a fence, the daughter will jump over a wall and the grand daughter will jump over a tower'. "He who misleads the upright into an evil way will fall into his own pit" (Prov 28:10) is a moral lesson found in Malayalam a little differently. *Thān kuzhicha kuzhil than thanne vīzhum*, one falls into the pit one has dug (maliciously). 7) That "The love of money is the root of all evils" (1 Tim 6:10a) is a matter of human experience in many cases. Malayalam has here two formulations: *Dravyamōham sarvadōshakāranam*, desire for wealth is the cause of all evil. *Kanakam moolam, kaminimoolam, kalaham palavidhamulakil sulabham*, Because of gold and woman there

are so many quarrels in the world. 8) The Malayalam proverb, *Visakunnavan thinnathathilla*, there is nothing that a hungry man does not eat, is parallel to the biblical saying that "To one who is hungry everything bitter is sweet" (Prov 27:7b). 9) We have some biblical sayings about disciplining the child as "Bow down his neck in his youth, and beat his sides while he is young" (Sirach 30:12). "A son unrestrained turn out to be wilful" (Sirach 30:8b). "Pamper a child and he will frighten you, play with him, and he will give you grief" (Sirach 30:9). And in Malayalam we have: *Adiyakutty padya*, a child that is not beaten will not learn. *Adikundu valarunna kuttiyumu adachu vevicha kashayavum orupole*, a child that has grown under the discipline of the rod and medicine cooked in closed pots are alike.

From the NT we have a number of sayings which have become proverbial in Malayalam. 1) *Oru pāthram pachavellathinum prathiphalam thircha*, Recompense is certain even for a cup of water reminds us of the words of Jesus: "Whoever gives ... even a cup of water ... he shall not lose his reward" (Mt 10:42). 2) *Pravacakar svadeśathum svabhavanathilum adarickapedunnilla*, prophets are not accepted in their own country and house (Mt 13:57). 3) *Nikshepam eidayō, hrudayavum avide*, Where your treasure, there your heart too (Mt 6:21). 4) *Deivathēyum mamōneyum onnichu sevikkanava*, one cannot serve God and mammon at the same time (Mt 6:24). 5) *Ōrō divasathinum athathinte kashtappadu mathi*, the day's own suffering is sufficient for the day (Mt 6: 34). 6) *Viśudhavasthukal naycku kodukarulhu*, Do not give dogs what is holy (Mt 7:6). 7) *Muthukal panniyude munnipil vithararulhu*, do not throw pearls before the swine (Mt 7:6b). 8) *Saukhyamullavarkalla rōgikalkkanu vaidyanekondavasyam*, Sick people need the physician and not the healthy (Mt 9:13). 9) *Puthuveegnu pazhaya tholkudathil ozhikkarilla*, new wine is not put into old wineskins (Mt 9:17 a). 10) *Pazhaya thuniyil kodi thuni thunnippidipikarilla*, nobody puts a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment (Mt 6:16 a). 11) *Sarppangaleppole vivekikalum pravukaleppole nishkalankarum*, prudent like the serpents and innocent like the doves (Mt 10:16). 12) *Guruvinekal valiya sisyanilla*, there is no disciple greater than the master (Mt 10:24). 13) *Sorggaraggyam balavaśamakunnu*, the kingdom of heaven suffers violence (Mt 11:12). 14) *Hrudayathikavilninnu adharangal samsarikunnu*, 'Out

of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks', (Mt 12:34b; Mk 6:45b). 15) *Andane andan vazhykānichal iruvarum kuzhyil*, "if a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit" (Mt 15:14b). 16) *Idarcha undakkunnavanu kashtam*, "woe to the man by whom scandal comes" (Mt 18:7). 17) *Vaydhyā ninne-
thanne sukhappeduthuka*, Physician, cure yourself (Lk 4:23).

Bible-inspired proverbs in Malayalam

There are some persons and events that have become proverbial in Malayalam. Solomon stands for wisdom, David for a singer and Daniel for a just judge. Judas typifies a traitor; John love, Nathaniel simplicity. Cross symbolises suffering and victory simultaneously while the Exodus is a symbol of a crisis. Malayalam is really rich in proverbs inspired by the Bible. At least they are very similar to the biblical ones even in their literary presentation.

1) "A poor man is disliked even by his neighbour, but a rich one has many friends" (Prov 11:10) is echoed in the sayings: *Dhanamullavanu ēvanum bendhu*, to the rich man everybody is a relative. *Sukhathil sakhimarērum*, in abundance there are many friends. The same idea is expressed negatively and figuratively, *dhanamillatha puruṣaṇum manamillatha pūvum orupōle*, A man without wealth and a flower without fragrance are alike. 2) "Better is a neighbour who is near than a brother who is far away" (Prov 27:10) is taken further in Malayalam: *Ariyatha pīasinēkal ariyunna pīasu nannu*, a known devil is better than an unknown devil, or better, *doorathe bandhuvinekal arikathe saṭhru nannu*. An enemy who is nearby is better than a relative who is far away. 3) The O. T. "eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe" (Dt 21:24; Mt 5:38) has its counterpart in Malayalam in its own way: *Vettinu vettu, kuthinu kuthu, thaṭtinu thaṭu*, wound for wound, cut for cut, lash for lash. 4) *Sthānam vittu chakkara thinnaruthu*, do not eat candy by selling your position, is a saying inspired by the story of Esau, son of Isaac and Rebekah who sold his birth-right to his brother Jacob for some pottage (Gen 25:29-34). 5) "*Anujathiye kanichu jyeshtathiye kettikuka*, Show the younger daughter and give the elder daughter in marriage is a reflection of the story of Jacob who was given the elder sister Leah instead of the younger Rachael who was presented to him (Gen 29:15-30). 6). "Many are the

plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will be established" (Prov 19:21) is a statement on human experience which the Malayalees have expressed as *Anyatha chinthitham kāryam; deivamanythra chinthayēn*: God thinks differently from what man thinks. *Anyante kannile karadu nōkkaruthu*: do not look at the speck in another's eye is inspired by: "First take the log out of your own eyes, and then you will be able to take the speck out of your brother's eye" (Mt 7:5). *Appam chōdichavanu kallu kodukkuka*: give stone to one who asks for bread, is from Mt 7:9.

Malayalam proverbs that are parallel to the biblical proverbs

Besides the many proverbs directly taken from the Bible or inspired by it indirectly, we have a good number of proverbs and wise sayings which are parallel or similar to the biblical sayings. Here we shall pick up a few of them. 1) A proverb concerning Israel found in Jeremiah (31:29) and Ezekiel (18:2) "The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge" has a very witty and interesting parallel: *Achananapurathu kayariyal makante asanathil thazhampundakumō?* Will there be any mark on the buttocks of the son because the father sits on the back of an elephant? 2) When Qoheleth says that "a living dog is better than a dead lion" (9:4b), Malayalam expresses the same idea: *chatha simhathēkal Jeevanulla kuthira nannu*: a living horse is better than a dead lion. Here the contrast is less strong and more realistic. 3) In Isian time of peace and tranquillity "The cow and the bear shall feed; their young shall lie down together, and the lion shall eat straw like the ox" (Is 11:7). Malayalam too has the vision of a time of peace when there will be the experience of *Pulikkuttiyum paśukkuttiyum koodikalikkuka*, the calves and the young bears playing together. 4) The eighth century prophet Micah (6:6ff.) declared that religious ceremonies are acceptable to God only when there is real interior life and concern for others. Offering of calves and rams or of even one's own first-born is of no value; they become valuable only when they are an expression of genuine *dharma* or righteous life made concrete in human relationships (Mic 6:8). Hence in Malayalam we have: *Kaseeku pōyālum dharmam thulayilla*, even if one goes to Kasi (the

great pilgrim centre today known as Banaras or Varanasi) his *Karma* or action and its results are not affected. Again we have, *Dhūpam kattiyaṭhukondu pāpam śamikumō?* Will incensing remove sin?

Conclusion

The Bible, with its rich mine of wisdom sayings, has contributed much to the enrichment of Malayalam which is spoken by some twenty four million people in South India with over thirtythree percent of the people professing the Christian religion. Proverbs in general are of a secular and universal character and are at home in any culture. We have examined some of the proverbs in Malayalam which are directly or indirectly from the Bible and some which are inspired by the Bible. A fourth category has parallel in the Bible, which are for that matter simply from human experience and observation though they look very much similar even in words. Well, mankind everywhere can have the same experience and expression. Anyhow, we are now convinced that the Bible has influenced Malayalam literature in a remarkable way and that the process can go ahead with the modern translations and popularisations of the Bible in Malayalam.

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Foot Notes

1. Of course, we are not able to search and identify every proverb and make comparative study.
2. Velayudhan Panickassery, *Pathinayiram Pazhanchollukal*, National Bookstall, Kottayam, 1982, p. 6ff.
3. S. H. Blank, "Proverb" in IDB III, Nashville, 1962, p. 936.
4. R. B. Y. Scott, *The Way of Wisdom in the Old Testament*, New York, 1971, p. 26ff.
5. Sri. T. Ramalingapilla, *Saileenighandu*; Sri. Vadakumkoor Rajaraja, *Saileepradeepam*; K. T. Chakkunni, *Randayirathionnu Pazhanchollukal*; P. C. Kartha, *Pazhancholprapancham*; S. K. Nair, *Dravidachollukal*; G. Somanathan, *Pazhanchollile chiri*, National Bookstall, Kottayam, 1985.
6. We have been very much helped by the work of Velayudhan Panickassery (note 2) whose copy we thankfully received from the CMC sisters at Ramapuram.

Proverbs in Indian Religious Culture

Introduction

In Indian religious culture proverbial transmission of truth is a very common literary style. It has been in use as a pedagogical technique. In the history of Indian educational practices the longest period seems to be of oral transmission. It is the process of passing on lived experience with its merits and demerits, premonitions and admonitions, blessings and benedictions to posterity. Such communication was usually done by parents to children, grand parents to grand children, masters to disciples and sages to their favoured votaries. The material thus passed on to posterity consisted of elements of universal truths already discovered, experienced and lived by people in their practical ways of life. Such lived practical truths became maxims or norms for the successive generations to be followed up in their own respective living contexts. They served them with experiential cautions and historical warnings. If posterity didn't care for such warnings offered by their forefathers it was believed that they would be condemned to repeat those errors of their forefathers, and would never improve upon their own ways of thinking and living. In short the posterity might not learn anything from their forefathers' behaviour unless they paid respect to their practical wisdom. Therefore proverbs are generally considered to be the maxims of the lived experience of the ancestors, their wit and wisdom, follies and humours, learnings and warnings, perceptions and precepts, insights and ecstasies, all put in thought-provoking "sayings". Proverbs are such "great sayings", "words projected for the benefit of others" (*pro-verba*). Such sayings accompany the expositions of a teacher even today dealing with any branch of knowledge, secular or sacred, adding again and again force and vitality to the wisdom of antiquity, while giving

clues to safer ways of future experiments and investigations into the challenges of human life and actions.

I. The living contexts

The living contexts (*Sitz im Leben*) of proverbial sayings in Indian culture are manifold. These contexts may have to consider mainly two aspects of the proverbial material: (a) their origin, and (b) their transmission. With regard to the origin it is generally accepted by scholars and literary critics that proverbial sayings evolved from the very inception of human sapiential experience, along with man's attempt to communicate his initial excitements of the experiments with nature. Ancient people's close encounters with their environment of life and activity, beginning with their wanderings in the dense forests and dreadful deserts, their crossing of mountain ranges and waterways, passages through narrow gates of clefts, searches for companionship, struggles for settlements, learning of farming, taming of animals, veneration of the celestial bodies of the sun, the moon and the stars as these were considered beneficial for their survival on earth, attempts to make their fortunes multiplied by trade and commerce, curiosity to explore the hidden treasures of the earth and oceans, quest for the ways and means of enjoyment in eating, drinking and merry-making, as well as their creative sense for imitating nature in arts and poetry, crafts and industries, their craving for power and domination – all supplied experimental contexts as well as experiential content to the proverbial wisdom.

With regard to the transmission of the proverbial wisdom the family, the *gurukula* (school), pilgrim centres, hermitages, assemblies of the learned, market places and royal courts often turned to be the living contexts of proverbial communication. In the family contexts secretive doctrines, ancestral craftsmanship, patriarchal precepts of good conduct and discipline were transmitted to children by parents or grand parents in their respective responsible roles of guardianship.

In the *gurukulas* of Kapila, Parasara, Yajnavalkya, Valmiki, Vyasa, Vasishta, Viswamitra and others the great 'sayings' of their predecessors about right conduct, moral integrity, right ways of achieving human values (*purushārthas*), rules of

good polity and jurisprudence etc. were passed on to their disciples. They in their turn reiterated these sayings with their own added insights to their successors. Thus there are numerous traditions (*paramparyas*) of proverbial sayings known after numerous masters of various *gurukulas*. Such proverbial traditions are found in the Vedic Samhitas, *Upanishads*, *Dharmaśāstras*, *Purāṇas*, *Nītiśāstras* as well as in *Ramayāṇa* and *Mahabharata*.

The royal courts like that of Sudarshana of Pataliputra as mentioned in *Hitopadesha* often functioned as living contexts of the development of proverbial wisdom. Such contexts enriched proverbial sayings with lessons of moral disciplines, statesmanship and jurisprudence, which are often taught by learned Brahmins like Vasishtha and Vishnusharma. Such wise men who were well versed in the various sciences (*śāstras*) and informed of the great lores of the ancients (*Puranas*) used to teach great lessons to the princes in the form of proverbial stories and parables. Both *Panchatantra* and *Hitopadesha* are collections of such teachings on jurisprudence and statesmanship known as *nītiśāstras* in the form of proverbial fables and parables.

Similarly the hermitages of Atri, Viswamitra, Bharadwaja, Agastya and others as mentioned in *Ramayana* helped young and enthusiastic students of noble birth learn the wisdom of the forefathers, as narrated in proverbial maxims. Some of such maxims taught by the *rshis* of such hermitages were sacred *mantras* which were only secretly taught and passed on to faithful and committed disciples. They were later came to be known as *mahavakyas* "great sayings" containing deeper experiential insights of those realized sages who claimed to have possessed divine powers which could be transmitted to faithful disciples who also practiced similar disciplines under their tutorship.

II. Literary types and characteristics

Proverbial wisdom may be classified under the following literary types:

- 1) Edifying discourses (*saropadesha*)
- 2) Moral stories (*guṇapaṭakatha*)
- 3) Parables (*upama*)
- 4) Aphoristic maxims (*sutra*)
- 5) Ancestral precepts (*aptavakhyas*)

6) Sacred syllables (*mantra*)

7) Great sayings (*mahavakhya*)

A short illustrative explanation of each of these types seems to be useful.

1. Edifying discourses are some sort of inferences derived from the long lived experience of learned people. They imparted such quintessence to their friends or disciples during their exhortations. These discourses consisted of valid conclusions to their expositions of related topics. Such pieces of essential advice (*saropadesha*) served as guidelines for practical judgment. Once communicated orally by forefathers or masters, the later compilers or teachers reiterated such pieces of life-observations as instructive lessons in order to illustrate their main argument or theoretical expositions of subjects. We may observe plenty of such *saropadeshas* in the Vedas, *Upanishads*, *Epics*, *Puranas*, *Dharmasastras* and *Nitisastras*. A few examples may be cited here:

a) *Regarding friendship*: "No longer does the man who has abandoned a congenial friend possess a share in the Word. Vain is his hearing, whatsoever he hears. He does not recognize the path of goodness." (Rv. X, 71,6)

"Friends, though endowed alike with sight and hearing, may yet in quickness of mind be quite unequal. Some are like ponds that reach to mouth or shoulder, while others resemble lakes deep enough for bathing." (Rv. 71,7)

b) *Regarding learning, wealth and duties*: "A wise man should think of (acquiring) learning and wealth as though he were not subject to old age or death. Yet he should perform his religious duties (*dharma*) as if death had seized him by the hair. Learning, of all things, (the wise) declare to be the highest, because of its incapability of being taken away, or valued or exhausted." (*Hitopadesha*, preface 3-4)

2. Moral Stories (*gunapatakatha*) are short fables composed with moralistic overtones specially meant for teaching the youngsters principles of good conduct and ideal manners. Often in such stories the characters are hominised animals and birds. Most of the stories in *Panchatantra* and *Hitopadesha* as well as the interludes in the Puranic and Epic narratives are such moral stories which are proverbial in nature and function. They are neither myths nor mere fairy tales, but moral meta-

phors, and as less such very articulate and figurative in sense and meaning. The stories of the crow, the tortoise, the deer and the mouse, who were the best friends gifted with intellect are proverbial moral stories probably created by Vishnusarma, the teacher in *Panchatantra* and *Hilopadesha*.

3. Parables (*upamas*) are very common and popular type of proverbs. Parables are imaginative stories of comparison deliberately created by teachers with various didactic interests. Such didactic intentions are not less always moralistic in nature, but meant for making difficult lessons or theories more easily understood. Hence most parables are analogical illustrations, and comparative connectives such as "like", "as", "in the same way", "similarly" etc., are necessarily used in view of making the figurative function of the story very clear so that the listeners may not be confused between fact and fiction, reality and appearance, event and possibility. In fact the main function of a parabolic proverb is more or less the same as that of the 'literary figure' *upama* (simile). Hence the same word is used in Sanskrit to indicate this category of proverbs. Every simile (*upama*) is analogical in meaning and never literally interprets any of the details of the referent. The intentional meaning is to be preferred to naive literal sense of the parable. To this category of proverbial stories belongs the story of "Trisanku" as narrated by Valmiki in *Ramayana* or the story of "Satyavan and Savitri" as narrated by Vyasa in *Mahabharata*, retold again in recent times by Sri Aurobindo in his interpretation of the Upanishadic theory of *atman* and *jiva*. The former story has even become a one-phrase proverbial analogy in our Indian languages, i. e., to attempt at achieving something unrealistic is "like reaching *trisanku swarga*".

4. Aphoristic Maxims (*sutra*) are short pithy sayings which have acquired a certain universal significance and value so much so that such sayings state summarily universal truths. Sayings such as "truth alone will survive" (*satyameva jayate*), "Non-violence is the greatest virtue" (*ahimsa paramo dharma*), "knowledge is superior to all riches" (*vidyadhanam sarvadhanam pradhanam*) etc., are proverbial maxims. These declarations of the ancient^s are expected to become norms of actions for posterity especially in the contexts of conflicting ideals.

5. Ancestral Precepts (*aptavakhyas*) are short exhortations of forefathers and teachers who are acknowledged by generations as reliable persons whose wisdom-sayings, because of their pedagogical authority, command respect. Hence such declarations are known as "sayings of reliable persons" (*aptavakhyas*). The main sources of such precepts are the Brahmanas, Upanishads, Puranas, Dharmasastras and *Nyaya darśana* as well as *Nītisastras*.

Some examples:

- a) "He who is imitating and following what another does is undoubtedly inferior" (*Satapatha Brahmana*, (Sat. Br.) I, 4, 5, II).
- b) "What one performs with knowledge, with faith, with meditation, that indeed, becomes more effective" (*Chhandogya Upanishad* I, 1, 10).
- c) "When a man has faith, then he thinks. Nobody thinks until he has faith. Only by having faith a man thinks. So you should really desire to understand faith" (*Chh. Up.* VII, 19).
- d) "Give with faith; give nothing without faith" (*Tait- Up* I, 11, 3).
- e) "Those who perform ritual acts, who know Scripture, who are firmly established in the Ultimate, who offer themselves with faith to the unique Seer, to them should perfect knowledge be declared" (*Mundaka Up.* III, 2, 10).
- f) "Without faith whatever offerings or gift is made or work done or penance performed, is reckoned "non-being" both now and hereafter" (*Bhagavad Gita* XVIII, 28).

6. Sacred Syllables (*mantra*) are those short verses from the Scriptures considered to be inspired utterances of mystics and sages, magicians (*mantriks*) and exorcists (*tantriks*). Such utterances are of the nature of spells, cryptic syllables, "words of power" endowed with magical properties believed to be inherent in sounds. In this sense a *mantra* is often described as a set of sounds containing inherent thought-power which may be productive of certain psychological or hypnotic effects on persons who submit themselves to such incantations. There are 'memorable' mantras which have to be recollected at the moment of the action prescribed for the mantras. Such mantras are charged with certain mystic powers obtained from divine sources. Examples of this kind of mantras are numerous in the contexts of the training of cadets for warfare in the schools of

Parasurama, Viswamitra, Dronacharya and others mentioned in Ramayana and Mahabharata. Often mantras are proverbially used on the occasions of benediction or curse. The results produced by mantras vary according to the intention of the user of such mantras. Some mantras produce mystic trance and some enlightenment, and still others success in accuracy especially at war fronts. Often these mantras are very secretly transmitted by the masters to their faithful and devoted disciples. The cases of Ekalavya, Arjuna, Karna and Harischandra are proverbial in the application of the mantras they received from their masters to be effective or not effective depending upon the fidelity or honesty with which they learned such mantras from their masters, and their faithful following of the disciplines which are associated with them at the time of transmission.

Proverbial mantras are generally divided into two categories: i) *Kāṇṭhika* ('throated'), ii) *Ajapa* ('non-uttered'). The *Kāṇṭhika* are called so because of the basis of sound originating mainly from human throat. Yet related to other parts of sound-production or reception this category is further divided into: a) *vāchika* (spoken or uttered aloud). A number of sacrificial mantras, prayers and invocations are of this category. At the times of *Grha-pujas* as well as on occasions of Vedic sacrifices such as *Aśvamedha* or *Rājasuya* as re-enacted in Ramayana and Mahabharata, the *vachika mantras* are recited for the hearing of all present on the occasion; b) *bhramara* ('humming'), mantras generally used for private ejaculatory recitations; c) *janantika* (lit. 'people nearby'), those whispered or spoken in a low voice, so as not to be overheard; d) *karnika* ('whispered into the ear'), a special kind of initiatory benediction conveyed to the disciples privately.

Ajapa (non-uttered) are those mantras which are not recited loudly but only internally repeated. They are further divided into: (a) *upamśu* (silent), i. e., those mantras whose idea could be visualised and hence kept in one's consciousness rather than recited even by one's lips; (b) *mānasa* (mental), mantras which are to be meditated upon and their meaning has to be internalized by constant contemplation.

Mystic powers are believed to be hidden in the proverbial *mantras* as they are transmitted from "parent to child" or

“master to disciple” lineages of direct succession, everytime additionally charged with the experiential energy of the one who transmits a mantra. Every child or disciple receives a mantra with the additional charge of conviction added to a mantra by his immediate predecessor. The monosyllabic mantras are generally known as *bijakshara* (‘seed-syllable’) and the most famous and powerful of all is *AUM*. According to *Māṇḍukya Upanishad* it is compounded of three sounds: A, U, M, representing the three Vedas (*Rig, Yajur, Sama*), the three worlds (heaven, earth and interspace) and the chief three personifications of Brahman (Brahma, Vishnu, Siva). It also embodies all the secrets of the universe gathered into a focus of transcendence. Hence it is a summation of all the wisdom of the forefathers who uttered it and realized its mystic depth, using it for invocations, affirmations, benedictions, and at the commencement and conclusion of recitals, prayers, meditations and even of secular work done by devoted people. Spiritually and theologically *AUM* is said to be the mystical quintessence of the entire cosmos and is nothing less than the theophany itself reduced to the state of a phoneme.

Other more commonly used proverbial mantras which have assumed the forms of exclamations and benedictions mostly used at the sacrificial contexts as well as on occasions of welcome or valedictory moments are: *śubhamastu* (‘let it be beneficial’), *āyushman bhava* (‘may you live long’), *svasti* (‘good luck’), *spadha* (‘oblation’), *svaha* (‘offering’), *sam yoh* (‘blessings’), *ojah saha saha ojah* (‘might, power, power, might’), *bhur bhuwah svah* (‘earth, heavens, space’), known as *vya hrili*, (‘concealed utterance’). This mantra is uttered specially before the *Gayatri mantra*, which is a prayer for enlightenment, known as the students’ invocation. The exclamation *aum tat sat*, ‘Aum-That-Real!’ is a very commonly expressed proverbial mantra among the Hindus having its strong footing on the *Bhagavadgita* vision of Supreme Reality.

7. **Great Sayings** (*mahavakyas*) are the short maxims indicating the identity of all things in Brahman. They are mostly taken from the Upanishads, and as such they articulate the assimilated wisdom of the ancient Seers who pondered over the harmonious unity of the entire cosmic order in the One Supreme Reality. From *Bṛhadaranyaka Upanishad* we have the proverbial mahavakyas; *neti, neti* (Brahman is ‘not this, not this’), *sarvosmi*

('I am all'), *aham eva idam* ('I indeed am this'), *ayam atma brahma* ('this self is Brahman'), *prajñānam brahman* ('Brahman is consciousness'), *aham brahmāsmi* ('I am Brahman'). The famous prayer for immortality found in Brhadaranyaka is set in its proverbial formative setting as, *avir avir ma edhi* (O Manifest, manifest to me):

Asato ma sad gamaya; tamaso mā jyotir gamaya; mṛtyor ma amṛtam gamaya. (From the unreal lead me to the real, from darkness lead me to light, from death lead me to immortality, *Br. Up* I, 3, 28).

Similarly from *Chhandogya Upanishad* there are the proverbial mahavakyas: *tat tvam asi* ('that thou art'), *sarvam khalu idam brahma* ('everything verily is Brahman'), *ekamevādvitīyam* ('only one without a second'). So also from *Isavasya Upanishad*: *yas tvam asi so'ham asmi* ('what thou art, that am I'); *tyaktena bhunjitha* ('enjoy by renouncing'). Again from *Mandukya Upanishad*: *santam śivam advaitam* ('that one is tranquil, blissful and non-dual'). *Mundaka Upanishad* states: *brahma eva idam* (Brahman verily is the whole world) and *brahma vid brahmaiva bhavati* ('one who knows Brahman becomes Brahman'), *satyam eva jayati* ('truth indeed prevails'). The famous monotheistic mahavakya of Rigveda is also a proverb of the ancient seers who preceded the compiler of the Riks: *ekam sad, vipra bahudha vadanti* (There is only One Real, but wisemen call it by various names (*Rv.* I, 164, 46).

As general characteristics we may note that among the seven categories of proverbs mentioned above, *saropadesha* (edifying discourse), *gunapālakatha* (moral stories), *upama* (parables), *sutra* (maxims) and *aptavakyas* (ancestral precepts) are more pedagogical in nature and function. They evolved mostly in the gurukulas. They were also transmitted either in the teachers' traditions (*paramparas*), or on their peripathetic sojourns with their disciples while moving from place to place. A larger section of these categories are aimed at character-formation of the pupils and training in various disciplines of life beginning with personal hygiene, good manners, good health, longevity, mastery of various arts, crafts and sciences including art of statesmanship, warfare and jurisprudence. The major thrusts of such education seem to have been laid on the acquisition of a correct value perception in life based on the scheme of *purusharthas* (*artha-kama-dharma-moksha*) in close sequence with the

varnashrama scheme of social life and its graded achievements. In such a combined scheme of life there might occur so many details of human aspects of personal growth and social relationship such as economics, administration of justice and adjudication of wrong doings. Obviously a moralistically overtone educational system offered by great masters had in its agenda a strict code of conduct which is the quintessence of most of the pedagogical proverbs.

Education does not stop at mastering a few principles of practical life and social dealings. Its scope had been visualized also in terms of universal ideals of welfare, spiritual transcendence and such other ultimate concerns of human life. It is in these lines we see the rest of the two categories, namely, *mantras* and *mahavakyas*. These are expressions of mature levels of value realization, especially with reference to the highest values in human life, i. e., spiritual liberation or communion with God. The time old attempts of great seekers and seers are handed down as proverbial wisdom in the forms of secret *mantras* and *mahavakyas*, and the challenge is offered to all posterity to look at those great ideals of spiritual insights and strive in their own respective ways with the guidance of enlightened masters, following the footsteps of the great seers and sages.

III. The secular outlook

After having surveyed the types and general characteristics of the proverbial wisdom it may be interesting to have a glance through some of the secular concerns of the proverbial sayings. The best thing to do here seems to state some of the insightful proverbs especially of the category of *saropadesha*, *upamas* and *aplavakyas* dealing with such details of life which are mostly secular in nature but needs a valuational perspective:

a) Regarding food and purity

"If your food is pure, your whole being will be pure" (*Chh. Up.* VII, 26,2).

"He who eats alone is all sin" (*Rv.* X. 117, 6).

"Those who prepare food just for themselves are sinful: they eat sin" (*Bhag. Gita.* III, 13; *Manu* III, 118).

b) *Food and hospitality*

"Let a man not deny hospitality to any one. That is a sound precept. Let him therefore lay in a large store food in whatever way he can. Of such a man people will say: 'Food just seems to accrue to him'. If this food is prepared in an excellent way for others, it is prepared in an excellent way for him who gives. If it is prepared in a mediocre way, then it is prepared in a mediocre way for him. If it is prepared in a miserable way for others, then it is prepared in a miserable way for him." (*Tait. Up.* III, 10, 1)

c) *Food as the source of life*

"From food, indeed, are creatures produced, all living things that dwell on the earth. Moreover by food, in truth, do they live and into it they finally pass." (*Mait. Up.* VI, 11)

"For food, assuredly prevents decay;
Food is worshipful, so they declare,
Food is the life of animals, supreme,
Food is a healer, so they say." (*Mait. Up.* VI, 13)

d) *The unhappy man*

"One who is envious, one given to reviling, one (ever) discontented, one who is irascible and one who is always suspicious — these have misery for their lot." (*Hitopadesha* I, 25)

"From greed proceeds disquietude, from greed springs up the desire (for pleasure), and from greed result infatuation and finally ruin; greed is the root of sin." (*Hito.* I, 27)

"Fortitude in adversity and forbearance in prosperity, eloquence in an assembly and valour on the battle-field, a liking for fame (good name) and a strong attachment to study — these are the natural possessions of the magnanimous." (*Hito.* I, 32)

e) *The happy man*

"A man of self-respect will rather die than stoop to meanness, fire will even suffer extinction, but never become cool." (*Hito.* I, 132)

"All riches are his whose mind is contented: is not the earth overspread with leather (as it were) to him whose feet are covered with shoes." (*Hito.* I, 144)

"How can that happiness, which is enjoyed by the tranquil-minded, who are satisfied with the nectar of contentment, be

theirs, who, attracted by the (lust of) wealth, run here and there"? Moreover,

"All has been studied, heard and put into practice by him, by whom, having cast behind all desires, contentment has been resorted to." Again,

"Blessed is the life of some one (rarely to be found) in which the door of the rich has not been attended, in which the pain of separation has not been experienced and in which piteous words have not been uttered." (*Hito*. I, 147)

f) *Preference of values*

"From poverty a man comes to have shame; overwhelmed with shame he loses moral fortitude; with his moral fortitude lost he suffers contempt; being condemned he feels dejected; full of dejection he comes to sorrow; when overcome with sorrow he is forsaken by reason; with his reason gone, he passes on to destruction; want of wealth, alas, is the abode of all misfortune" (*Hito*. I, 138)

"Better is silence observed than an untrue word spoken; better is impotency for men than intercourse with another's wife; better to abandon life than to have a liking for the words of the wicked; better to live on alms than to have the happiness of enjoying another's wealth." (*Hito*. I, 139)

IV. Sociological outlook

Even though the basic social framework of the proverbial sayings is the *varnashrama* scheme of social life, most of the socially expressive proverbs admit universal criteria for evaluating a person's status, character, dignity and nobility. One of the reliable universal maxims is right learning:

a) "Learning although possessed by a low-born man introduces him to the king who is ordinarily unapproachable, just as a river, although flowing through a low region, takes one to the inaccessible ocean." (*Hito*. Prologue)

b) "Learning endows one with modesty; modesty takes one to worthiness; being worthy one obtains riches; and from riches one is led to religious merit which leads to happiness." (*ibid*)

c) "The knowledge of arms and that of the *sastras*, both are conducive to bring social acceptance (glory); yet the former

exposes one to ridicule in old age, while the latter is ever respected." (*ibid*)

d) "It is better to have one meritorious son than a hundred foolish ones; the single moon dispels darkness, and not the whole firmament of stars." (*Hito. Prologue*, 17)

e) "A father who contracts debts (i.e., leaves nothing to his son but a legacy of debt) is an enemy, and so is a mother who turns to be a prostitute; a beautiful wife is an enemy and so is an illiterate son." (*Hito. Prol.* 20)

f) "Learning if not kept up by constant study is poison; taking food during indigestion is poison; to a poor man the assembly of the learned is poison; and to an old man a youthful wife is poison." (*ibid*, 22)

Another important maxim of achieving respectable position in society is good association and friendship. The following are proverbial maxims in this line:

a) "A piece of glass by being in contact with gold, possesses the lustre of emerald; similarly a fool attains proficiency by being in the company of the good", because it is said:

b) "The intellect is impaired by being in the society of inferior humans; it remains what it is with one's equals, but is improved by means of association with men of superior learning." (*ibid.* 42)

c) "As objects on the rising mountain appear bright by the near presence of the sun, so a person of humble rank too shines by being in the company of the good." (*ibid.* 46)

d) "Rivers at their origins have their water sweet, but at the mouth of the ocean they turn to be salty." (*ibid.* 47)

e) "Judge a woman not by her charms but by her qualities; judge a man not by his birth but by his conduct. Judge a scholar not by his learning but by his achievement; and judge a merchant not by his fortune but by his understanding." (N. K. Sethi, *Hindu Proverbs and Wisdom*, p. 6)

From these and many similar proverbs we may rightly infer that the valuational perceptions transcend the caste-ridden social structure and they point to certain universal criteria which every body should seek and strive in view of improving one's social position.

V. Religious outlook

The proverbs originating from the Vedic, Puranic, Epic and Dharmasastric sources describe man to be dutybound to offer sacrifice on behalf of the whole creation. Because his basic faith is that man is born three times:

a) "First he is born from his mother and father. He is born a second time while performing the sacrifice that becomes his share. He is born a third time when he dies and they place him on the pyre and he proceeds to a new existence": Therefore they say, "Man is born three times".

b) "Human body is the altar of sacrifice" — *sariram vedir (Pra-agnihotra Up. 40)*. To this there is the well known sequel: *śariramādyam khalu karma sadhanam* — human body indeed is the first of the sacrificial offering (*Vishnu Purana*).

c) "There are five great sacrifices (*panchamaha yajña*): the sacrifice to all beings, sacrifice to men, sacrifice to the ancestors, sacrifice to the Gods, sacrifice to Brahman." (*Sat. Brah. XI, 5, 6, 1*)

d) "Day by day a man offers sustenance to creatures, that is the sacrifice to beings; day by day a man gives hospitality to guests, even a glass of water, that is the sacrifice to men; day by day a man makes funerary offerings, even a glass of water in honour of his deceased, that is the sacrifice to the ancestors; day by day a man makes offerings to the Gods, even some wood for keeping his hearth burning, and that is his sacrifice to the Gods" (*Sat. Br. XI, 5, 6, 2*). "And the sacrifice to Brahman consists of doing one's study of the sacred texts." (*Sat. Br. XI, 5, 6, 3*)

e) "And the sacrifice is considered to be the navel of the universe" *avam yajno bhuvanasya nabhih* (*Rv. I, 164, 35*).

f) "Every sacrifice is a safe boat to the heavenly harbour" — *sarva eva yajna nauḥ svargya* (*Sat. Br. IV, 2, 5, 10*).

g) "Every sacrifice has only one sure foundation, only one abode, the heavenly realm." (*Sat. Br. VIII, 7, 4, 6*)

h) "Sacrifice without faith is unproductive." (*Tait. Samhita, I, 6, 8, 1*)

Religious duty has been revered as the highest value to be pursued. To this effect there is this proverb in the *Hitopadesha*:

"Riches are comparable to the dust of the feet; youth flies away with the rapidity of a mountain river; life is as fleeting as a rolling drop of water; and existence is as evanescent as

foam. Such being the case, he who with wrong judgment does not perform the religious duties which unfasten the bolt of the gate of heaven, being overtaken by old age and full of contrition, is burnt by the fire of sorrow." I, 155

Conclusion (Theological insights)

As theological insights that can be gleaned from the proverbial sayings we may observe here the following:

1) Since the proverbial material is scattered throughout the entire *Sruti* and *Smyti* it is not feasible to identify one clear-cut theological vision identically followed up by the numerous masters who transmitted the proverbial wisdom to posterity. 2) However, one may be justified in observing that practically all the divergent theological perceptions are readable through the various proverbs as classified under the various categories mentioned previously, i. e., in the pre-upanishadic proverbs we may observe polytheistic traits especially in the contexts of the sacrifices to be offered in honour of the various deities, although some of the *mahavakyas* of the Vedic samhitas clearly point to the monotheistic faith of the people of the time. 3) Nevertheless, the *mahavakyas* of the upanishadic proverbial material clearly indicate an advaitic theology in all its various nuances as interpreted by the famous *acharyas* of the respective vedantic traditions. 4) Finally, I am inclined to think that in the popular proverbs which have acquired in the passage of time and usage some universal significance, there are clearer connotations of personalistic theologies descriptive of the common man's beliefs and practices, out of which the proverbs evolved with an orientation to give an overall linking to the manifold aspects of human life and activities, dreams and realizations, failures and triumphs; hence the Indian proverbs convey the legacy of a long lived past, yet to be re-enacted by us in an equally long livable future.

Biblical Proverbs

Genres and Features

Solomon the Wise

The Young Solomon, after ascending the throne of David, offered a thousand burnt offerings at Gibeon. There he had a vision in which God said: "Ask for whatever you want me to give you". But Solomon, unlike other monarchs, did not ask for longevity, riches, destruction of enemies and honour. Acknowledging his inexperience and inexpertise, he trusted in the covenant fidelity of Yahweh and prayed: "Give your servant an understanding heart to judge your people that I may discern between good and bad". The Lord was well pleased at the request. He blessed Solomon with a wise and discerning heart as well as with great wealth. He made him the most acclaimed king of that time. All people held Solomon in awe because they felt that God's wisdom worked in him while he administered justice (I Kg 3:4-28). The wisdom of Solomon is depicted in glowing colours in I Kg 4:29-34: "God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore. Solomon's wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the men of the East and greater than all the wisdom of Egypt. He was wiser than any other man, including Ethan the Ezrahite, wiser than Herman, Calcol and Darda, the sons of Mahol. And his fame spread to all the surrounding nations. He spoke three thousand proverbs and his songs numbered a thousand and five. He described plant life, from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of walls. He also taught about animals and birds, reptiles and fish. Men came from all nations to listen to Solomon's wisdom, and from all the Kings of the world who had heard of his

wisdom." Further, the author of the Book of I Kings reports: "King Solomon was greater in riches and wisdom than all the other kings of the earth. The whole world sought audience with Solomon to hear the wisdom God put in his heart." (10:23-24). The queen of Sheba "came to test him with hard questions... Solomon answered all her questions; nothing was too hard for the king to explain to her. When the queen of Sheba saw all the wisdom of Solomon...she was overwhelmed" (10:1-5).

The first man of Gen 2-3 coveted the status of the Wise¹. Instead of having recourse to Yahweh, he tried to outsmart the Deity by trying to snatch the gift of knowledge of good and evil. This made him a fool, condemned to bear the evil consequences of his unwise action. Now Solomon typifies a new humanity who also aspires after understanding and discernment. He goes to his God and entreats this gift of Him for the service of his fellowmen. Yahweh blesses his devotee with the boon of wisdom together with prosperity, peace and worldwide renown. Solomon the Wise knew the secrets of life which embraced even the animal and vegetative kingdoms. Thus he possessed the mastery of life in its totality which extended to physical, psychological, intellectual, social, commercial, cultural and cultic aspects. Here emerges the concept of *Life in the Wisdom Literature* which reaches out to creation — cosmic dimensions². Solomon assumes the figure of archetypal wise man — the paradigm and metaphor of the new Adam. Tradition ascribes to him the authorship of wisdom lore. Hence, in the light of I Kg 4:22, he is considered the author of the Book of Proverbs (1:1) which is the basic unit of Wisdom lore.

The meaning of *mashal*

The simplest and most common form of Wisdom teaching is *mashāl*. Its original meaning eludes us. Two etymological attempts deserve mention. Some hold that the root means "rule", hence the noun indicates "a ruling, saying", i.e., an authoritative word. This may point to an important characteristic of *mashal* as a pithy aphorism distilling human experience in apt and memorable form which commands respect and assent. Another suggestion attributes to the word the meaning "likeness" or "comparison", which is derived from the verb "be like". This

root is well attested in the Bible as well as other semitic languages. In some instances the word *mashal* clearly conveys the idea of comparison: Ez 16:44: "As mother, so daughter"; Prov. 10:26: "Like vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes, so is a sluggard to those who send him"; Gen 10:9: "Like Nimrod a mighty hunter before Yahweh". The saying in I Sam 10:11, "Is Saul also among the prophets?" seems to signify that his behaviour resembled that of the ecstasies of the time. But the difficulty with this interpretation is that the majority of instances do not convey the idea of likeness. Perhaps the word had undergone such an extensive evolution as to have obscured or lost the original connotation.

The term proverb

The traditional translation, "Proverb" is enigmatic in character, since the word in the Biblical usage does not convey only a single meaning. I Sam 10:12 refers to a folk saying. Ez 12:22, "The days go by and every vision comes to nothing", belongs to the same type of astute popular aphorism. The citation of David in I Sam 24:13, "Out of the wicked comes forth wickedness", provides another instance of adept maxim. But the word mainly designates in the Bible a variety of more artificial literary forms. It can indicate a parable or allegory (Ez 17:2), a taunt song (Is 14:4), an object of ridicule (Dt 28:51), a prophetic oracle (Num 23:7) or figurative language (Jn 16:25) 29). In the Book of Proverbs the term is extended to cover polished apothegms, lengthy instructions and speeches, acrostic and alphabetizing poems, example stories, numerical sayings, paranesis and riddles.

Basic literary genres

Wisdom Literature shares a common vocabulary with the Torah and the Prophets. This makes it rather difficult to characterise Wisdom's special features. Stylistic, thematic or theological similarities do not necessarily indicate direct influence or outright borrowing from the other literature. The following literary genres occur in the Book of Proverbs⁴.

a) *Folk Proverb*: This pithy, succinct one-line or two-line (sometimes more) artistic observational saying is derived from experience. Some aspect of reality is formulated in the indicative mood. No practical or didactic conclusions are explicitly drawn

which are left to the conscious reader. Hence folk proverb may be called experiential or observational saying.

“One man pretends to be rich yet has nothing;
Another pretends to be poor, yet has great wealth.”
(Prov. 13:7)

This paradoxical pungent formulation is a striking mnemonic device. Prov. 11:24 deserves citation: “One man gives freely, yet gains even more; another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty”. Folk Proverbs as well as didactic sayings are very often masterpieces of artistic formulations. They employ literary devices as alliteration (15:27a), assonance (10:9a; 13:20b), rhyme (11:2a; 13:3) and paraonomasia⁵ (22:24). Sometimes experiential sayings admit ambiguities and antinomies. Compare the verses of 27 and 28 of Chapter 17:

“He who restrains his words has knowledge,
and he who is even-tempered, is a man of understanding.”
“Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise.
When he closes his lips he is deemed intelligent.”

This apparently contradictory statement derives from sheer observation of daily life. Both realities could coexist and may be correct at different contexts. Proverbial thinking rejects a simplistic life vision which does not take into account its complexities and vicissitudes.

b) *Didactic saying*: Very often observational saying grows into didactic saying, hence the appellation ‘Folk Proverb’ may be applied also to this type. It is not content by merely registering a fact. Some value or lesson is inculcated. No issue is left as an open question. The aphorism is meant to influence human conduct. It characterizes a certain act or attitude. Didactic saying exhibits the same artistic, stylistic and grammatic formulation of the Observational saying^b.

“A word aptly spoken is like

Apples of gold in settings of silver.” (Prov. 25:11)

Some other examples: 10:7; 14:31; 15:23; 15:33; 19-17; 22:22-23. 25:11; 26:25.

c) *Wisdom Instruction*: This is very commonly short (rarely lengthy) and uses imperative mood to prescribe a rule of conduct or certain value to an individual or group. There exist two types of instructions, positive (command) or negative (prohibition)

with motif clause which enhances pedagogical thrust of instruction to persuade or convince the pupil. It is usually introduced by *ki* (if), *pen* (lest). Prov. 22:24-25 adduces moral risk as a motive:

“Do not make friends with a hot-tempered man, do not associate with one easily angered, *lest* you may learn his ways and get yourself ensnared.”

The motive of retribution occurs in Prov. 22:22-23:

“Do not exploit the poor because they are poor and do not crush the needy in court, *for* the Lord will take up their case and plunder those who plunder them.”

The section of “the Words of the Wise” (22:17-24:22) consistently uses the genre of Instruction. Its resemblance to the Egyptian Instruction of Amenemope deserves special mention. Ten sets of evolved, longer Instructions are found in Prov. 1-9: 1:8-9:18; 2:1-22; 3:1-12; 3:13-24; 3-25-35; 4:1-9; 4-10-29; 5:1-23; 6:20-35; 7:1-27. The hearer/reader is frequently addressed as “my son”, thus providing a paternal and authoritative tone to the Instructions. The first Instruction contains an admonition⁸ to heed “parental” teaching and warning⁹ against enticement of sinners. The second Instruction serves to deliver the pupil from bad company and “strange woman”. Drawing on the fate of the just and the wicked, *sishya* is asked to walk in justice. The third Instruction consists of commands and prohibitions to heed the sage’s teachings to worship the Lord, about kindness and truth, about relying on the Lord, about fear of the Lord, and His discipline. Describing the benefits of Wisdom the addressee is asked in the fourth Instruction to keep company of it. The fifth Instruction presents a series of five prohibitions concerning ethical conduct as well as a series of sayings about Yahweh’s dealings with good and evil. A series of commands and prohibitions about the acquisition of Wisdom forms the theme of the sixth Instruction. The seventh Instruction deals with the ways of Wisdom and the wicked, and commands and prohibitions relative to various bodily organs as heart, mouth, lips, eyes and feet, are listed. The eighth Instruction returns to the theme of the adulteress with commands and prohibitions about avoiding her as well as about fidelity to one’s wife. It

concludes with a statement of Yahweh's retribution for the wicked. Warning against involvement with evil woman is the main theme of the ninth Instruction. The tenth Instruction continues the same theme.

d) *Wisdom Speech*: Prov. 1:20-23; 8:1-36 and 9:3-6 present public addresses uttered by personified wisdom. Didactic overtones are evident in the discourses of Lady Wisdom¹⁰ who assumes the garb of a goddess (8:12-31). Authors have drawn striking similarities between proverbial speeches and Egyptian wisdom corpus. The following motifs are attributed to the Egyptian divinity *Ma'at* and the OT Lady Wisdom: preexistence (Prov. 8:22-31); loving those who love her (Prov. 8:17), giving life and protection (Prov 1:33) 3:16,18; 8:35), wearing the deity's image by men (Prov 3:3; 6:21), and the symbolic representation in art (Prov 3:16). The plaintive address of the personified Wisdom begins thus:

"How long will you 'simple' ones love your simple ways?
How long will mockers delight in mockery and fools hate
knowledge?" (1:22)

Like a person of authority she commands (1:23), reproaches (motif of calling not heeding: 24-25), threatens (motif of calling/not hearing: 26-28), announces reward (33) or doom (31-32). In 8:4-36 she invites the people to listen to her and recommends herself to them for the reasons of the rightness and value of her teaching, her qualities, her dealings with her followers and her eternal origins, and concludes with the promise of life or threat of death. According to 9:-16 Lady Wisdom builds a luxurious seven-pillared house, prepares a banquet and invites all the simple ones to come, eat and drink:

"Leave your simple ways and you will live;
Walk in the way of understanding." (9:6)

e) *Alphabetizing Poems*: Provs. 2-8 contain poems constructed with twenty-two/three lines on the analogy of the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet¹². Prov. 2 provides a clear case. A related literary device is Acrostic Poem whose structure is also guided by alphabetic considerations. Prov. 31:10-31 is an acrostic poem, with each verse beginning with the successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet on the ideal wife.

f) *Example Story*: Provs 7:6-23 and 24:30-34 use this genre. Con-

crete stories are provided to illustrate a point. Prov. 7 tells the story of a youth "without sense", while ch. 24 speaks of a sluggard.

g) *Autobiographical Narrative* occurs in the Egyptian wisdom literature where it is spoken by kings and renowned persons. Traces of these literary devices are found in Prov. 4:3-9 and 24:30-34 where they serve also as an example story.

h) *Imagined Discourse* appears in contexts treating the problem of false thinking in general. Prov. 1:11-14, 22-23; 3:28; 5:12-14 provide some instances of such strident speech which are employed to stimulate correct thinking and to ridicule false reasoning.

i) *Allegory*: This speech form is closely related to figurative or metaphorical language. Two allegories which characterize a wife as a cistern and doe occur in Prov. 6:15-23.

j) *Wisdom Prayer*: The Collection of "the Words of Agur" provides an instance of Wisdom Prayer 30:7-9 which exhibits didactic overtones:

"Keep falsehood and lies far from me;
give me neither poverty nor riches,
but give me only my daily bread." (30:8)

k) *Numerical saying*: This numerical pattern consists of a title-line and a list. The title-line mentions the feature which the items listed have in common:

"There are six things the Lord hates,
Seven that are detestable to him:
haughty eyes,
a lying tongue,
hands that shed innocent blood,
a heart that devises wicked schemes,
feet that are quick to rush into evil,
a false witness who pours out lies,
and a man who stirs up dissension among brothers."
(Prov 6:16-19)

Prov. 30:15-33 offers a collection of mostly numerical sayings. They bring out reflective sayings about humanity, society and nature:¹³ 30:15b-16 about insatiability; 18-19 about marvels in nature; 21-23 about intolerable things; 24-28 about four small but wise creatures; 29-31 about stately creatures.

Structural and stylistic features

The Book bears an overall title: "The Proverbs of Solomon, son of David, King of Israel" (1:1), in which one may see an example of the literary practices of the scribes. The numerical equivalents of the key terms of the title, Solomon, David and Israel, come to 930 which is only several digits off from the number of lines of the Book.

The Book does not simply contain the collection of "Proverbs of Solomon" although it forms the major part of the Book (10:1-22:16). Other collections are clearly attributed to other kings and sages: two collections of "the Words of the Wise" (22:17-24:22; 24:23-34); other collections belong to men of Hezekiah (25:1-29:27), Agur (30:1-9) and Lemuel (31:1-9). The number of proverbs in the Solomonic collection comes to 375 which is the numerical equivalent of the Hebrew name *šlmh*, Solomon. This collection may be divided into two sections: chs. 10-15 and chs. 16-22. The literary device of antithetic parallelism abounds in the first section. To cite an example:

"A prudent man keeps his knowledge to himself,
but the heart of fools blurts out folly." (12:23)

The second section primarily employs synonymous parallelism. Thus:

"A wicked man listens to evil lips,
a liar pays attention to a malicious tongue." (17:4)

We find there some instances of the device of synthetic parallelism:

"The Lord works out everything for his own ends —
even the wicked for a day of disaster." (16:1)

There exists another type of literary device, comparative parallelism, which occurs, for instance, in the collection of "Proverbs of men of Hezekiah":

"Like clouds and wind without rain
is a man who boasts of gifts he does not give." (25:14)

Prov 25:1 which introduces the collection of the men of Hezekiah, provides another instance of the scribal practice. The name *yhzqyh* spells out 140 which is the number of lines in that collection.

P. Skehan holds that the Book is constructed in tripartite fashion (1-9) 10:1-22:16; 22:17-31:31) on the analogy of a tripartite house (front porch, nave and rear private room) that corresponds proportionately to the dimensions of Solomon's temple¹⁴. According to this suggestion, the Book itself is a house, the house of Wisdom (cf. Wis 9:8-11) in which the sayings, instructions and speeches form the main structure.

H. J. Hermisson's study has illustrated important features of the literary style of the wisdom sayings¹⁵ which the English translations often fail to bring out.

a) *Juxtaposition*: The poetic line merely puts together two persons or things in a nominal sentence, without a verb: e.g.

"One who loves wrong — one who loves strife

One who makes his gate high — one who seeks destruction."
(17:19)

b) *The non-"Good"-saying*: "Without knowledge, even zeal is not good." (19:2). Some other instances: 17:26a; 18:5a; 20:23b; 24:23b; 25:27a; 28:21a.

c) *The "Better" Saying*: In the simplest form the idiom consists of the expressions *lôb min* ("better than"):

"He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty,

and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city." (16:32)

cf also 3:14; 22:1.

In Prov 16:8 we have a more sophisticated form of the "better" saying:

"Better is a little with righteousness
than great revenues with injustice."

Here the contrasting middle terms, "righteousness" and "injustice" transform the negative ("little") into a positive, and the positive ("great") into a negative. G.E. Bryce lists the transformational elements for some "better" sayings as follows¹⁶:

12:9	work	— as opposed to lack of bread
15:16	fear of Yahweh	— as opposed to trouble
15:17	love	— as opposed to hatred
16:8	righteousness	— as opposed to injustice
16:19	low of spirit	— as opposed to proud
17:1	quiet	— as opposed to strife

19:1	integrity	- as opposed to perverseness
27:5	openness	- as opposed to hiddenness
27:10b	nearness	- as opposed to distance

d) *Summary – Appraisal Formula*: This is a statement attached to the end of a literary unit which provides a summary and an appraisal of the preceding material. It consists of a demonstrative pronoun and usually has a bi-colon structure:

“Such is the end of all who go after ill-gotten gain;
it takes away the lives of those who get it.” (1:19)

Folk Proverbs in wisdom corpus

Other Books of the Wisdom literature frequently make use of Folk Proverbs. Some of them are pointed out here.

a) *Qohelet*: The aphorisms of 9:17-10:20 are similar to those of the Book of Proverbs with regard to both form and content. To cite two instances:

“Whoever digs a pit may fall into it;
Whoever breaks through a wall may be bitten by a snake.”
(Qoh 10:8)

“What is twisted cannot be straightened,
What is lacking cannot be counted.” (Qoh 1:15)

b) *Job*: Many fail to notice the existence of Folk Proverbs in *Job*.

“Affliction does not come from the dust,
nor does trouble sprout from the ground.” (Job 5:6)

“Does the wild ass bray when he has grass?
or the ox low over his fodder?” (Job 6:5)

“As the cloud fades and vanishes
so he who goes down to Sheol does not come up.” (Job 7:9)

“Drought and heat snatch away the snow waters
so does Sheol those who have sinned.” (Job 14:19)

c) *Ben Sirach* disparages manual labourers since “they are not found using proverbs” (38:33). He holds in high esteem those who “seek out the hidden meanings of proverbs” (39:3): Everyone has to be careful not to “let wise proverbs escape you” (6:35).

d) *Wisdom of Solomon* uses synonymous, antithetic and syn-

thetic parallelism in the first five chapters. Some instances of the Folk Proverbs:

"Understanding is gray hair for men,
and a blameless life is ripe old age." (Wisd 4:9)

"A multitude of wise men is the salvation of the world,
and a sensible king is the stability of his people." (6:24)

Cf also 1:3; 3:15; 3:16, 6:6

Proverbs and Prophets

Recent studies point out to the striking similarities between the Prophetic and Wisdom literature so as to hold Wisdom influence on the prophetic genres and literary devices¹⁷. The following texts seem to be similar to folk proverbs.

"Shall the axe vaunt itself over him who hews with it?
or the saw magnify itself against him who wields it?"
(Is 10:15)

"Dill is not threshed with a threshing edge,
nor is a cart wheel rolled over cumin." (Is 28:27)

"Can the Ethiopian change his skin
or the leopard his spots?" (Jer 13:13)

"What has straw in common with wheat?" (Jer 13:28)

"For they sow the wind
and they shall reap the whirlwind." (Hos. 8:7)

"Do horses run upon rocks?

Does one plow the sea with oxen?" (Am 6:12)

"Does a bird fall in a snare on the earth
when there is no trap for it?" (Am 3:3-6).

Setting of Proverbs

Most of the Experiential and Didactic Sayings as well as riddles seem to have originated from family, clan or tribal settings. Other genres exhibit mere artistic and literary polish and finesse. Hence one may hold that they, at least in their final form, would have undergone the refurbishing process. The setting of school or court fits here. Instructions bear the mark of teachers who educated their pupils as their "sons". The concepts of extended family and *gurukula* enter here. These aphorisms, maxims and speeches were collected by the royal scribes and ascribed them to the monarchs and sages. The final

editor gave a superscription, "the Proverbs of Solomon" to the whole Book.

Function of Proverbs

The Book of Proverbs clearly states the purpose:

"for attaining wisdom and discipline
for understanding words of insight,
for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life,
doing what is right and just and fair,
for giving prudence to the simple,
knowledge and discretion to the young —
let the wise listen and add to their learning,
and let the discerning get guidance —
for understanding proverbs and parables,
the sayings and riddles of the wise" (Prov 1:2-6).

It is meant for the young and the aged, pupils, teachers and sages. The didactic purpose assumes paramount importance. All these should lead to "the fear of the Lord which is the beginning of knowledge" (1:7) which stands as the programmatic saying.

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Foot Notes

- 1 See Editorial.
- 3 J. L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction*, Atlanta, 1981.
- 4 For the definitions of Wisdom genres, see, R. E. Murphy, *The Forms of the Old Testament Literature*, Vol. XIII, *Wisdom Literature*, Grand Rapids, 1981, esp. pp 171-185.
- 5 J. M. Thompson, *Form and Function of Proverbs in Ancient Israel* Hague, 1974, pp 59-68. B. Gemser, *Sprüche Salomos*, Tübingen, 1937, finds some form of paronomasia in almost every verse of the Book of Proverbs.
- 6 For details see H. J. Hermisson, *Studien zur israelitischen Spruchweisheit*, Neukirchen, 1968.
- 7 J. Pritchard (ed.), *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Related to the OT* Princeton, 1968, pp 421-24.

- 8 Admonition genre similar to Prohibition, is designed to dissuade somebody from a particular way of behaviour.
- 9 Warning genre with the accompanied indication of a danger or threat pressures somebody toward a given point of view or action.
- 10 Prov 9:13-17 presents a speech delivered by Dame Folly.
- 11 C. B. Kayatz, *Studien zu Proverbien 1-9*, Neukirchen, 1966, B.Lang *Frau Weisheit*, Dusseldorf, 1975.†
- 12 P. W Skehan masterly illustrates this literary device: *Studies in Israelite Poetry and Wisdom*, Washington, 1971, pp. 74-75, 96-104. According to him Prov 2-7 present seven columns of text of twenty-two lines each, that develops the topics of ch. 2.
- 13 See W. M. W. Roth, *Numerical Sayings in the O.T.*, Leiden, 1965.
- 14 See his book, *Studies in Israelite Poetry and Wisdom*, pp 27-45.
- 15 cf. Note 6.
- 16 G. E. Bryce, "Better-Proverbs: An Historical and Structural study", 1972 *Proceedings of SBL*, Vol. II, ed. L.C. McGaughey, pp. 343-54
- 17 See H. W. Wolff, *Amos geistige Heimat*, Neukirchen. 1964.

Proverbs Jesus used in the Gospel according to Matthew

1. Introduction

One comes across in the gospels the amazing ability of Jesus to make use of Parables and Proverbs and blend them with his new teaching. The same gospels record, how the hearers were surprised at the wise teaching of "the carpenter's son" and forced to exclaim: "Where did the man get this Wisdom"? (Mt 13:54b, 56b). By employing the parables and proverbs Jesus shows his pedagogical technique in presenting the Good News of the Kingdom effectively and in an entirely new manner (Mk 1:27). What follows is an attempt to gather together the different proverbs used by Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew, classify them under different headings and draw some theological conclusions.

2. The term proverb

The English term proverb is derived from the Latin *proverbium*, which in turn owes its emergence to Greek *par-oi-mi-a* (para = beside, oimos = a way or path). Etymologically it means a way-side saying, a trite expression or a common place remark. LXX uses the word *Paroemia* to translate the Hebrew noun *māsāl* which belongs to the verb *māsāl* meaning: to rule, to control. But the oldest occurrence of *masal* in the Bible (1 Sam 10:12) suggests a comparison, rather than ruling and governing. In order to convey this original sense of *masal*, scholars¹ prefer to use *parabole*, which means, "to set beside", "to compare", rather than *paroemia*. At the same time it is implicit that a parable is pregnant with a proverb and can be said to be a prolonged proverb. Without entering much into this polemic of linguistics, we may understand proverb as a concise, pithy saying drawn out of experience and contains pra-

ctical wisdom. In order to become a proverb any conclusion or formulation must "gain currency among a people"². Therefore a proverb cannot be a brand new invention of a sage or a theologian. Even if it is formulated by men of wisdom, it must receive the stamp of the public by using it in their daily life.

3. Proverbs used by Jesus in the Gospel according to Matthew

a) Among the synoptics it is Matthew who mirrors better the Jewish heart and mind. Hence it is not a surprise that he makes use of the proverbs that are known and acceptable to his milieux. There are 18 instances in the sermon on the mount, where Matthew uses proverbs (5:13,14,15,22,25,30,45; 6:3,21-24,34; 7:2,4,5,6,12,13,16) and in the rest of the gospel there are forty three occasions of proverbial use (9:12,14,15,16,17,37; 10:10,14,16,24,25,26,30; 11:15,17; 12:12,25,29,33,34; 13:12,31,32,57; 15:11,14,26; 16:2,3; 17:20; 19:24; 20:27; 21:21; 22:21; 23:12,24; 24:13,28,32,43; 26:41,42,52b.)

b) Among the above mentioned instances, we can trace proverbs which are already found in Talmud and others which appear for the first time in the Scripture³.

i) Proverbs which are found in Talmud already

Mt. 7:2,4,12: For with the judgement you pronounce you will be judged. and the measure you give will be the measure you get(2).

Or how can you say to your brother, "let me take the speck out of your eye", when there is the log in your own eye?(4)

So whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them; for this is the law and the prophets(12).

10:14,25, 30: And if any one will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town (14).

It is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household (25).

But even the hairs of your head are all numbered (30).

12:25: Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand.

13:31-32: The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed which a man took and sowed in his field.

It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.

17:20: For, truly, I say to you, if you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, "Move hence to yonder place", and it will move and nothing will be impossible to you.

19:24: It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God.

21:21: Truly, I say to you, if you have faith and never doubt, you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, "Be taken up and cast into the sea" it will be done.

23:12,24: Whoever exalts himself will be humbled and whoever humbles himself will be exalted (12).

You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel (24)

ii) Proverbs which occur for the first time in the Scripture

5:13,14,15: You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trodden under foot by men (13).

You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid (14).

Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house (15).

6:3,21,24: But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing (3).

For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also (21).

No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon (24).

7:5,16: You hypocrites, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye (5).

You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? (16).

9:12,16: Those who are well have no need of a physician but those who are sick (12).

And no one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch tears away from the garment, and a worse tear is made (16).

10:10,24,26: No bag for your journey, nor two tunics, nor sandals, nor a staff; for the labourer deserves his food (10).

A disciple is not above his teacher nor a servant above his master (24).

So have no fear of them — for nothing is covered that will not be revealed or hidden that will not be known (26).

12:34: You brood of vipers, how can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.

13:12,57: For to him who has will more be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who has not even what he has will be taken away (12).

A prophet is not without honour except in his own country and in his own house (57).

15:14: Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit.

c) *Literary style*

Matthew's literary style of the Proverbs is mostly by way of comparison and contrast. It is a sort of help for his readers to compare their life-situation and change for the better. The comparison and contrast pattern is seen in the following: holy things *versus* unholy things (12:34b; 15:22), wisdom of the thief (12:29) *vs* wisdom of the house-holder (24:43), signs of nature *vs* signs of the times (16:2-3; 24:32), man *vs* state (22:21), rejoicing *vs*

mourning (9:15), old *vs* new (9:16,17), man *vs* animal (12:12), need *vs* convention (9:12), conquering self *vs* yielding to selfishness (26:41,42), works *vs* fruits (7:16; 12:33), saving life *vs* absolute disaster (15:14b; 26:52), need for hard work *vs* weeding-out the lazy (9:37), teacher *vs* disciple (6:24; 10:24), division *vs* unity (12:15), kinsmen *vs* aliens (13:57), openness *vs* narrowness (5:45), anxiety *vs* confidence (6:34), risk *vs* easy-going-attitude (7:13), giving *vs* receiving (7:2,12; 13:12), hypocrisy *vs* righteousness (7:5), justice *vs* overdependence (10:10) and secrecy *vs* openness (10:26).

d) R.B.Y. Scott proposes a neat classification of the proverbs in eight patterns⁴. Though he applies it to the Book of Proverbs in the Old Testament, the classification holds good even to proverbs elsewhere. Following his method we may divide the proverbs under study into the following patterns:

i) Pattern of identity

Mt 24:28: Wherever the body is, there the eagles will be gathered together.

ii) Pattern of non-identity, contrast or paradox

7:6: Do not give dogs what is holy; and do not throw your pearls before swines, lest they trample them under foot and turn to attack you.

7:16: You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns or figs from thistles?

16:26: For what will it profit a man, if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life? Or what shall a man give in return for his life?

19:24: It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God.

20:27: And whoever would be first among you must be your slave.

23:12: Whoever exalts himself will be humbled and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

iii) Pattern of similarity, analogy or type

Mt 5:45: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.

7:13: Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction and those who enter by it are many.

iv) Pattern of what is contrary to right order,
and so is futile or absurd

5:13: You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trodden under foot by men.

5:14: You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid.

5:15: Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house.

9:15: Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come, when the bridegroom is taken away from them and then they will fast.

9:16: And no one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment...

9:17: Neither is new wine put into old wineskins; if it is, the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed; but new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved.

15:14: Let them alone; They are blind guides.

15:26: It is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.

v) Pattern that classifies and characterizes
persons, actions and situations

6:24: No one can serve two masters...

11:17: We piped to you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.

12:25: Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste.

15:11: Not what goes into the mouth defiles a man but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man.

16:2-3: When it is evening, you say, 'It will be fair weather; for the sky is red'. And in the morning 'It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening' you know how to interpret

the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.

24:32: From the fig tree learn its lesson; as soon as its branches become tender and put forth its leaves, you know that summer is near.

24:43: But know this, that if the house-holder had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have watched and would not have let his house be broken into.

vi) Pattern indicating value, relative value or priority, proportion or degree

5:30: And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.

12:12: Of how much more value is a man than a sheep? So it is lawful to do good on the sabbath.

22:21: Render, therefore, to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.

vii) Pattern based upon consequences or human character and behaviour

5:25: Make friends quickly with your accuser, while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison.

6:34: Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day's own trouble be sufficient for the day.

12:29: Or how can one enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? Then indeed he may plunder his house.

26:41-42: Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak. Again for the second time, he went away and prayed, 'My father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it thy will be done'.

26:52: Put your sword back into its place. All who take the sword will perish by the sword.

viii) Pattern of completes

12:33: Either make the tree good, and its fruit good; or make

the tree bad, and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit.

12:34b: Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks.

4. The thematic classification

The proverbs uttered by Jesus in the Gospel according to Matthew may be classified thematically in the following manner:

- a) God
 - b) The Kingdom of God
 - c) Discipleship: i) Identity, ii) Mission, iii) Challenge
 - d) Varia
- a) *God*

There are two proverbs, which reveal God's sense of equality and friendship.

In 5:45 while teaching his disciples Jesus makes an explicit mention of the type of equality that God practises. God allows his sun to rise on the evil men as well as the good and sends rain on the just and the unjust alike. God does not withdraw his blessings from unjust and evil men. Rather he prefers them, so that they may experience his love and be converted.

As a concrete gesture of God's concern for the evil men who are rejected by the just of the society, Jesus befriends them. When the so-called righteous men question his movements with them he defends his stand saying: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick" (9:12). Jesus does not deny the fact that these people are sinful and evil. But he justifies his contact with them, because he is a physician who can cure their illnesses. This comparison gives an appropriate answer and the questioner does not find any further room for a second question. This is the speciality of a proverb, which leaves no room for further argumentation, while disclosing a truth which is often forgotten and deliberately neglected.

b) *Kingdom of God*

- i) A new teaching (9:16-17)

The Kingdom is presented also by means of proverbs.

The novelty of the Kingdom is shown as something which is incompatible with the old way of life. Thus, in 9:16 we have the description of putting a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment and its aftermath. The same incompatibility is also shown as regards the new wine and the way it is preserved. New wine in fresh skins (9:17)

The nature of this newness of the Kingdom is so captivating that it will reject by its very nature every form of old structure and mixture. Kingdom is presented as radically and totally new and unique. Perhaps, without these proverbs the new teaching might not have sounded new at all. But the modalities of the new cloth and the new wine present the core of the message of the Kingdom in a striking and startling manner.

ii) Precious things (7:6)

The Kingdom of God is compared to something which is holy and to pearls that are precious. Hence what is holy cannot be thrown before dogs and pearls before swine. Dogs and swines do not deserve them, because they are incapable of comprehending their value and, above all, a complete disaster is in store for them. Jesus speaks about the proclamation of the Good News of the Kingdom. Though every one is welcome, it cannot be offered to those illdisposed and unprepared to receive it. The hostile men are compared to dogs and swines, which cannot reason nor can respect the precious things. The proverb is more a precaution to the proclaimers of the Good News, rather than a warning.

iii) Impossible things (19:26)

Jesus affirms that it will be very hard for rich people to enter into the Kingdom of God, because it necessarily involves breaking the barriers, pulling down the walls and accepting everybody as part of one's life. This is hard task for the rich who are secure and self-sufficient, hence will never enter fully into God's Kingdom. To articulate such a reality Jesus says: "...it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God" (19:26). The camel and the needle have nothing in common. In size they are opposites. But the fact remains that the camel cannot pass through the eye of a needle. It is an impossible thing, a ridicu-

lous and stupid thing even to contemplate. According to Jesus such is the impossibility for a rich man to enter God's Kingdom. By employing this proverb Jesus makes clear his teaching that God's Kingdom is meant for the poor in spirit (5:1).

c) *Discipleship*

i) identity

The teaching on discipleship contains the insertion of several proverbs. First of all a disciple is seen as the one who is not greater than his master (10:24), no matter how successful he might be. This proverb brings in the aspect of humility on the part of the disciple, which means he will never have any claim of superiority over his master: should he claim, it is but a proof of his callowness. The greatness of the master is that he can have several disciples at a time while a disciple cannot have several masters (6:24). He must have only one Master, otherwise he may turn out to be, what the modern proverb says, "Jack of all trades and master of none". Therefore, one disciple, one Master. The qualities of a disciple are further enumerated by making use of the proverbs. Discipline and discipleship go hand in hand. A disciple should train himself, accepting his own limitations. In this connection Jesus suggests prayer as a powerful weapon to combat every temptation (26:41a). The reason why a person yields to temptation is explained in 26:41b. Jesus' teaching on prayer is aptly presented in a proverbial form, bringing in the fact of struggle that every person undergoes: "The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak." This situation is offered a solution, i.e., watch and pray. It is alertness and looking at things as God would look at them. Jesus does not dramatize this genuine human experience, but handles it with serenity, inviting the disciples to treat the problem with optimism.

A disciple is also set before radical and serious options. The option includes even losing a part of his body (5:30). The radicality is seen in the value one attaches to that particular option. This proverb, "if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away", points to the singular option the disciple should make for the sake of the Kingdom. The emphasis is not on sin as on the Kingdom.

The life of a disciple is also challenging. The serious and singular option is expressed in having preference to enter by the narrow gate (*pule*). Though the narrow gate which is set against the wide gate, has references both in the Bible (Dt. 30: 15-20; Prov 12:28; cfr. Jer 21:8; Ps 1:6; Sir 15:17) and elsewhere (Qumran: *The Community Rule III*, 20f; 2 Enoch 30:15 etc.), the emphasis here is on the hardships of life. The way of the disciple is to face the challenges, rather than escaping them. Any escape deprives life of its natural growth and maturity, for life itself comes through suffering (Jn 16:21). Hence, the proverb "to enter by the narrow gate" recommends endurance and good will rather than timidity mingled with self-pity in facing life's challenges.

The identity of a disciple is not to be misunderstood as someone thrust into obligations and kept under the weight of suffocating rules, but a person who accepts life realistically with all its ups and downs. After all, the joy in life depends on one's relationship with the fellowmen. Mt 7:2b gives the yard stick to measure and weigh these relationships: "The measure you give is the measure you get." This is the acceptable norm in life. The relationship is mostly based upon such norms as "give and take". This is also the teaching of the law and the prophets (7:12). The proverb highlights this simple and practical wisdom, indispensable for any ordinary person. A disciple must have this wisdom as a starting point on which he can build up other radical options (5:40ff).

The word of mouth has more value, because it is identified with the person who utters it. The word that is uttered is equal to the attitude of the utterer. Though the mouth articulates, it is the heart that brews and determines the attitudes. A heart need not be all wise, it can be perverted. It is this heart that produces words which either exalt or destroy a person. Hence, through a person's words we have accessibility to his heart. This proverb is spoken in the context of one producing good works (12:3-4b). It is the heart that is at work, not the emotion nor instinct. In any case mouth serves as the instrument. A person is what he speaks.

Elsewhere in 15:11, mouth is presented as something that emits unclean things. Nothing from outside can make a

person unclean but what comes out of the mouth of a person can be totally unclean. The emphasis, therefore, is on the gracious speech, which is the outcome of a pure heart (5:8). In saying this Jesus stands against the Jewish traditions and conventions about ablutions and purification and proposes inwardness as a value.

A disciple is not only the one who has to put on all the extra qualities, but must be open to the wisdom that comes from the local circles: the wisdom of the serpents and the innocence of the doves. To survive one would need this shrewdness of the serpent as well as the gentleness of the dove. A serpent is cautious, so as not to provoke its adversaries. At the same time, the disciple is expected to be "innocent", "guileless", and "gentle". The cautiousness should not lead him to be "cunning", he should be innocent. A mixture of these two qualities will mark the shrewdness of a disciple. The "cautiousness" of the serpent and "gentleness" of the dove are well known facts to the hearers of Jesus. This concept need not be further elaborated to bring out the meaning Jesus intends, since it is an accepted fact. Jesus reaffirms it and shows no negligence to the wisdom that is so evident in daily life.

Finally, the identity of a disciple is also seen in the good works he produces (7:16). There must be a correspondence between what he preaches and what he practises. Grapes are found on the vine and figs on the fig tree. To find them elsewhere is contrary to the natural order. Therefore, immoral conduct and a lack of correspondence between life and preaching cannot be the lot of a true prophet. This is what Jesus hates in the pharisees (Mt 23:3). He imparts the new teaching by bringing in the elements of nature and their normal process of fructification known to everybody. It is the quality of good works that will make the disciple identified by the people (12:33). An overstress on this point may also lead one to self-deception. The point in question is the tools of identification in the case of a disciple.

ii) Mission

The mission of a disciple is explained by having access to the elements of nature. The disciple is asked to be the salt of the earth. In other words, without them the earth may not

have salt it needs. As salt has the function of flavouring and preserving food so are the disciples who on their part offer flavour and freshness of the Good News to the world around. Their saltiness consists in their wholehearted acceptance of the Good News and their deep-rooted relationship to the master and as a consequence their generous share in his mission. It is to this saltiness the proverb makes reference. The saltiness is the essence of the salt. The reference, therefore, is to the essence of discipleship. Technically speaking salt cannot lose its saline properties, but it can become useless if mixed with impurities. Similarly if the disciple does not practise the Good News, it may not be effective, because there is no sign of credibility of what he preaches. The saltiness precisely refers to this commitment and practice of the Good News.

Jesus asks the disciples to be the light of the world (5:14). With their light they will illumine the world's darkness. As lamp they are placed on a stand because they are messengers of the Gospel and transparent witnesses of the light. The focus is on the city built on a hill which cannot be hid. The nature of the Good News, therefore, is similar to the city that is built on a hill. Hence no one can deprive it of its prominence. A lamp which is put on a lamp-stand in the house, is intended to give light to the whole house. Hence it is not meant to be put under a bushel. Both those proverbs, "a city set on a hill cannot be hid", (5:14b) and "men do not light a lamp and put it under a bushel" (5:15a) are aimed at clarifying the mission mandate of the disciples. They help to recognize the prominence Jesus gives to their witness-value.

The mission of the disciples is also expressed in the form of service to fellow men. Both the preceding mandates to be the salt (5:13) and the light (5:14) of the world, though demanding, are equally prestigious. All prestige is coupled with greatness and uniqueness. But the disciples are not to be lulled by such ostentatious titles. They will realize their uniqueness and greatness only through their service to others. This is the unique proverb used by Jesus, because of its subversive capacity. It topples the value attached to power, prestige, possessions and

brings the disciples to set themselves towards a new-world-order, where the humble are exalted (Lk 1:18) and the mighty brought low (Lk 1:52). At another instance the same proverb is put in the passive: "whoever exalts himself will be humbled and whoever humbles himself will be exalted" (23:12). The truth is that the agent who confers honour or shame is God. To be identified is better than to identify one's own self, for the former suggests certain degree of relevance of a person in the given situation. It is this aspect of relevance that identifies persons. Both the texts suggest a selfless service to the neighbour without expecting any reward from any circle.

iii) Challenge (13:57)

The life of a disciple is of course not without its challenges. Persecution, loneliness, misunderstanding and rejection form part of his life. Jesus utters this proverb in a dramatic moment of his own life, when he visits Nazareth, his home town. His own disown and belittle him. In this moment of frustration, the disappointed maestro utters this proverb. Jesus must have expected them to acknowledge, seeing his works and gracious words, that he is a prophet. On their failure, he himself reveals his identity as prophet and says that a prophet is not honoured in his own country and by his own people, thus paving the way for the future generations to interpret their experiences of rejection in the light of his own. This proverb springs from the very experience of Jesus, and reveals the coldness, obstinacy and the bizarre behaviour of his country men. But the accent of the proverb is on the rejection that a prophet experiences, rather than on the agents of rejection.

d) *Varia*

i) Strategy (12:29; 24:43)

There is mention of two strategies here. The strategy of a thief (12:29) and that of the house-holder (29:13). A strategy is meant to execute a plan inspite of a possible opposition from the effecting circles.

In the strategy of the thief (12:29), Jesus while arguing that his works are not to be attributed to Beelzebul, declares that the strongman (i.e., Beelzebul) who has been reigning the world

is now bound. Hence his (Jesus') works cannot be from him (Beelzebul) but from the spirit of God. Jesus spells out his strategy that the King of this world is already taken to task.

In the second strategy the house-holder fails and the burgler has an upper hand. The sudden attack of the thief does not give any occasion to the house-holder for guarding against it and so he is plundered and his entire house is laid waste.

By using these proverbs Jesus explains the ways of God and the eruption of God's Kingdom. It does not happen when everything is well-set. God takes His time and shows Himself when He is least expected. A strategist always tries to have an upperhand in the execution of his plans. Jesus insists upon these strategies without which even God would not be called "God of surprises".

ii) Weather (16:2-3)

Even if the meteorological explanations were unknown, it was a common belief among the people that a red sky in the evening meant fair weather and the same in the morning was disastrous. By using this proverb Jesus refutes charges of those who were demanding a sign from him. Jesus brings out the lack of perception of the people. If a red sky can make them believe an imminent change in the weather, how is it that the several miracles bring no change in the hearts of the hearers who still seek fresh signs at which they are thrilled and applaud the Rabbi of Nazareth. Jesus on the other hand is critical about their ignorance of the signs of the times.

iii) Seasons (24:32)

This proverb is centred around the fig tree. As soon as its branches become tender and put forth leaves, it is believed that summer is near.

This proverb is based upon a natural sign that happens to a fig tree. Jesus uses this parable to pinpoint the coming of the Son of Man and the signs that will accompany it.

iv) King and cult (22:21)

Jesus' teaching is never a mess. He is always clear even in his thinking on political issues. It is evident in what he says when asked about paying taxes to Caesar. His answer suggests

no exclusive faithfulness to one party, while antagonising the other. The sign plays an important role here, since it suggests ownership and sovereignty. Jesus' answer is impartial and hence it astonishes the hearers (v.22).

v) Value of Man (12:12)

Jesus manifests his radical thinking and teaching by setting himself against the useless social and religious conventions of the Jews. In this connection he deliberately breaks the sabbath and provokes the law makers' wrath. Jesus holds on to his conviction that the value of man is much more than a sheep. Consequently, he wants to cure the man with a withered hand on the sabbath itself. This deliberate violation of the law and Jesus' idea behind such violation have become proverbial with sound anthropological overtones. Perhaps what Jesus has in mind is that God is God of the living and any honour due to Him can be given only by those who are fully alive. For His honour no one should be denied the fullness of life.

vi) Disunity (12:25)

Unity is strength, and going against this dictum results in the weakening of the Kingdom or of the household. When division creeps in, unity is lost. This dictum may be juxtaposed with another, "divide and rule". Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste. Jesus means to say that his works which reveal and manifest the maximum good cannot be from Satan. Since they accuse him saying that he does these marvels through Beelzebul, Jesus defends himself by asking how Beelzebul can produce any good work? How will any satanic legion produce good things, if they are divided among themselves? Since his miracle here makes the dumb demoniac speak, it cannot be from the Beelzebul or from its legion, but from God alone. As Jesus sets himself against the reign of Beelzebul, no one can term him as the partner of Beelzebul. In fact they are arch-enemies to each other, and he wishes to see the end of satan's reign (Lk 10:18). Beelzebul is not merely divided but it is being defeated and destroyed since the Good News of the Kingdom is proclaimed and men are invited to repent and enter the Kingdom. Besides the proverb holds good in conveying the message that any counter witness within the given unit leads towards the annihilation of the same.

vii) Justice (10:10c)

“The labourer deserves his food.”

This proverb is a clear statement of Jesus on justice. Justice, as intended by Jesus in this proverb, has an element of ‘merit’. He utters this proverb as part of his instruction to the disciples (10:5b-15). When the disciples go and proclaim the Good News, accompanied by healings, their work should not be belittled. They will be paid all they require, since they are working selflessly without expecting any material gain in return (10:9-10). Precisely because of this merit, they deserve their food, the basic need of every human being.

Today it is applied to the larger context of labour, where the labourers are worthy of their wages. This statement of Jesus stands against every kind of oppressive system, where a labourer is exploited, specially women and children. This sublime reality of justice, is expressed in the proverb: “The labourer deserves his food.”

Towards a theology of Proverbs

Jesus uses these proverbs in presenting the great themes of the Kingdom, viz., discipleship, light, gracious speech, generosity, good works, justice etc. He uses a variety of proverbs in dealing with the different topics in his discourses. The proverbs are used mostly to clarify the new teaching of the Kingdom. The terseness of the proverbs and their contents leave no doubt in the mind of the hearers (10:10c; 10:24). We also note that almost every proverb that Jesus uses serves as a conclusion to a particular discourse. There is hardly an instance when, soon after his use of a proverb, any further argument is raised by the adversaries. The famous question on paying taxes to Caesar is one such example (22:21). Jesus evinces practical wisdom in speaking of the elements of nature and the mode of their use (5:13; 11:16; 16:2-3; 24:32 etc.). The proverb is not only meant for imparting a new teaching, but the very presentation of it makes the hearers compare their lives with the new teaching. When Jesus speaks about the light (5:14-16) he reminds his audience of the darker side of the world and the darkness in themselves. When he speaks about the tasteless salt he reminds them of the false prophets who have no saltiness in them (5:13). When he speaks about the good God Who makes His sun

rise and sends rain on saints and sinners alike (5:45; 9:12), he creates in them a sense of compassion and equality. Jesus uses apt comparisons when he speaks about the preciousness of the Kingdom (7:6; 15:26), so that what he teaches may become also a value for the hearers. Even the dangerous reptiles like serpents (10:16) are said to have something to teach. Jesus advocates a certain sense of openness and perception to things and persons around. Even inanimate things like trees (24:32) can guide the understanding of man about the cosmos. Human values like equality (5:45), unity (12:25) and mutual respect (12:12) are part of the teachings of Jesus through proverbs.

The teaching of Jesus through proverbs discourages any further exegesis. Proverb, being a concise wisdom saying sticks in the hearers' mind and will remain with them for good. Several times people are amazed at his teaching. The doctors of the law are silenced at several times in public, but they plot against him in secret, because they could not excel him either in wisdom or in piety.

Conclusion

Though there are many more proverbs in Matthew and other Gospels, I have dealt with only a few of them. It is a temptation among many to look at the proverbs only as one of the figures of speech in the Bible or as a pedagogical technique of Jesus. It is very striking that every proverb contains an element of experience, which is articulated and passed on to the people, generation after generation, before it obtains wide recognition. Looking at the ease with which Jesus integrates the existing proverbs and creates new ones in difficult situations (26:41), it appears that the life of every believer can one day become proverbial.

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Foot Notes

1. Blank S.H., *Proverb*, in IDB, Vol. III, p. 934; Hauck, *Parabole*, in TDNT, Vol. V, p. 744-761; *Paroemia*, *ibid.* pp. 854-856.
2. Murphy E., Roland, *Wisdom Literature: Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Canticles, Ecclesiastes and Esther*, FOTL, Vol. XIII, Michigan, 1981, p.4.
3. For this classification I depended upon Bullinger E.W., *Figures of speech used in the Bible*, Michigan, 1986, pp 755-767.
4. Scott R.B.Y., *Proverbs*, Anchor Bible, New York, 1965, p. 3ff.

Theology of Religions

TOWARDS AN INDIAN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM Our Ongoing Search

**Statement of the Indian Theological Association
Thirteenth Annual Meeting, December 28–31, 1989
(St. Paul's Seminary, Tiruchirappalli)**

Introduction

1. Finding ourselves in a country engaged in an incessant search for the ultimate, which has expressed itself in giving shape to some of the world's great religions, and witnessing the novel phenomenon of numerous Christians seeking the fullness of their life through the spiritual experience offered by other religions, we the members of the Indian Theological Association, gathered at St. Paul's Seminary in the vicinity of Srirangam — a fertile ground of intense religious experience of Vaishnavite Hinduism — wanted to devote ourselves to deeper reflection on the reality of religious pluralism and its role today in understanding and defining our own true identity as disciples of Christ. But the deeper we tried to go into our own self-understanding, the more it became clear to us that we should follow the path of a kenotic Christ stripped of all shades of triumphalism and treading the path of the pilgrim Christ who will take us to the vast and unbound horizon of divine experience from where God our Father beckons us. It is with this wide vision, freedom of mind and sincere desire to be open to the signs of the times, that we propose these reflections, the result of our prayer and painful thinking. We do not claim to have developed a complete theology of religious

pluralism. We wished to be honest to ourselves and to the pledge that we had made last year to continue our search for a more meaningful encounter with other religions.

In retrospect

2. In the statement we made last year we humbly acknowledged that we had not succeeded in formulating any adequate theology of religions and that our work remained unfinished. We had decided, therefore, to continue this search by delving deeper into the question of religious pluralism and to move towards a truly relevant theology of religions.

3. After examining the role of religion in society from a sociological perspective and underscoring the fundamental religious dimension of people, last year we looked at the fact of religious pluralism and the emergence of world religions in their revivalist and missionary dimensions. The side-by-side existence, and the creative encounter of the major world religions have qualitatively changed our pluralistic context and raised several important questions: Could religious pluralism be affirmed *de jure* in God's plan of creation and salvation? Is not religious pluralism the cultural expression of the infinite riches of the Absolute which cannot be adequately contained in any one historical event, person or tradition? What is the relation between revelation, faith and their expressions in belief-systems, rituals, symbols and the ethical behaviour which emerge from a particular socio-cultural context? Could there be a genuine dialogue without accepting the partner as the other, with total openness, not of course without one's own faith experience and convictions? Could a committed Christian holding the uniqueness, centrality and finality of Christ enter into a sincere and open dialogue with the believers of other faiths?

4. With these and similar questions in mind, last year, we examined the Christian attitude to other religions and discovered in the history of the Church a variety of Christian responses, such as, a totally negative attitude, categories of natural-supernatural, partial-full complementarity, which are often referred to as ecclesiocentrism, Christocentrism and theocentrism. We could not, however, critically examine these different responses, categories and the ensuing theological controversies. But we realized more and more the limitations of

those theoretical approaches to the faith of other people, which often came from a monoreligio-cultural society and a mere academic and speculative point of view. We became convinced that any authentic and living theology of religious pluralism can emerge only from the context of an inter-religious praxis of liberation, dialogue and inculturation, where we have to accept other faiths as the other but in the actual context of relatedness.

5. We had therefore proposed in our search for a theology of religious pluralism to have a deeper theological reflection on the ongoing inter-religious liberative praxis and the liberation hermeneutic of religions on inter-religious dialogue and on the phenomenon and process of inculturation. We hoped that this would give us new light to understand and, if needed, to reinterpret the role of religions in our life, and the inter-relatedness of different faiths, and thus help us to spell out an authentic theology of religious pluralism.

The meaning of the theology of religious pluralism

6. We want our reflection to be authentically theological, i. e., emerging not from a mere intellectual effort but from the depths of our being as committed believers touched by the Absolute Reality.

7. We are not speaking of a general interest in or even of a scientific study of other religions, however much these are necessary in the theological task before us. For if one dared to say a word about other religions from a distance, so to say, or from a superficial acquaintance with them, one's word would lack authenticity and credibility. Nor are we speaking about a comparative study of religions, though such a comparison can enrich the critical understanding and articulation of one's own faith.

8. We want to express what the plurality of the religions we meet every day of our lives in India means to us as believers, as people who experience themselves as touched and strengthened by the ineffable Mystery of Existence. As we perceive the signs of the Absolute Presence also in the lives of our sisters and brothers around us professing various religions, we ask in

the light of the divine Truth revealing itself, what we should affirm about these religions, and how we understand the purpose and meaning of the wonderful religious variety around us and its role and function in the attainment of Salvation. We are not called to sit in judgement on them, but we wish to understand them not merely from a rationalistic or historical angle but in the light of the Truth coming to us from above.

9. As Christians, we approach these questions from our own faith perspective. We shall necessarily use the imperfect categories and the language at our disposal. We have been educated in the Christian religion and our theological language cannot but be influenced by the two thousand years of its existence. Followers of other religions may not always be able to make our imperfect expressions their own, and it is not our expectation that they do so. However, we should make sure that they do not feel that our expressions do violence to or distort their own self-understanding in its vital core. After a long experience of living with friends of other faiths and of dialogue with them, we are called upon to speak theologically about these faiths with integrity and total respect, and to find a place of honour for them in our own theological world.

10 Undoubtedly, believers of other religions also reflect on the plurality of religions from their own perspectives and using their own theological language. Perhaps one day, when dialogue will have progressed further, we shall be able to evolve a common language in which each tradition will recognize its own identity and its relatedness to others.

11. Our task is truly tremendous. We are not just dealing with a recent concern of believers all over the world or developing a peripheral section of the discipline we call theology. An authentically dialogal theology of religions will necessarily affect the whole of our theology as it naturally raises radical questions concerning our own beliefs and the way we have articulated them. What we say about religions in the light of faith will have an impact on what we say about God, about Jesus Christ, about his Spirit, and about the Church. It is the awareness that the Spirit of God is active in the world and in the heart of our deepest religious convictions that emboldens us to persevere in this task so necessary today.

Liberative praxis and theology of religious pluralism

12. In a situation of imposed poverty of the masses and of pluralism of religions and humanist ideologies, the combined struggles of the peoples of different faiths and ideologies for liberation, especially those of the awakened poor and marginalised, become the significant *locus theologicus* and term of reference for a theology of religions from a liberation perspective. In this connection, we are aware of the great contextual pluralism of liberation experiences, such as dalit liberation, feminist liberation, tribal and workers' movements and human rights movements. Underlying such a pluralism of liberation experiences, there is an implicit transformative understanding of religions. Such an understanding seems to be operative in all critical inter-human and inter-religious action and struggles for liberation.

13. This calls for a *Kenosis* and a crucifying purification of the distortions of religions by which they become counter-signs. In a situation of socio-political and cultural divisions, alienations, ideological manipulations and cooptations, religions have often become great obstacles to liberative praxis. These distortions are based on categories that make religions ahistorical in their concern and dichotomising and spiritualising in their interpretation. Liberative praxis makes an ideological critique of these interpretations.

14. The primacy of orthopraxis over orthodoxy brings sensitivity and attunement to the recovery of the liberative core of religions manifesting itself as a liberation-salvation process. We are thereby called to a rereading and a rearticulation of the fundamental faith-affirmations for a liberating inter-human and inter-religious fellowship of peoples. In this hermeneutic, liberation is understood in terms of a wholeness of humans, nature, cosmos and the Ultimate. In a world divided between the powerful and the powerless, wholeness of liberation always includes a preferential option for the powerless and marginalized.

15. If this is a liberation hermeneutic of religions, it will reinterpret every religious specificity in its fundamental affirmations and release its liberative *elan* as a source of vision and a *dharma* of transformative praxis, leading to a holistic and dynamic inter-human relatedness of ideologies and faiths. Such a trans-

formative praxis is rooted in dialogue and calls for inculturation. A liberative hermeneutic of religions thus opens up towards a liberative ecumenism of religions. This will lead to a liberation of religions themselves from their exclusivism, fundamentalism, and superiority claims and bring them closer to each other in mutual acceptance and relatedness.

Dialogue and the theology of religious pluralism

16. One insight, among many others, that contemporary thought on human nature has brought to light, is the radical insufficiency of any isolated human existence and its need for dialogue for its own self-understanding and authenticity. This principle is valid also in the realm of our religious existence. A religion, however exalted, can no more define itself in splendid isolation from other religions. Rather it has to evolve its own self-understanding in its manifold forms of relatedness to other religions. This takes us to the reality of dialogue in our life.

17. As the recently published Vatican Document on Dialogue states, "Every follower of Christ, by reason of his human and Christian vocation, is called to live dialogue in his daily life, whether he finds himself in a majority situation or in that of a minority."¹ This dialogue is "a manner of acting, an attitude and a spirit which guides one's conduct. It implies concern, respect, and hospitality towards the other. It leaves room for the other person's identity, his modes of expression and his values."²

18. True dialogue takes place only between authentic persons in the specificity of their own faith. Genuine dialogue demands loyalty to one's own faith, and readiness to share it with members of other faith-experiences and to listen to them with reverence and appreciation. In order to do this sincerely and meaningfully, we should be aware of the structures of limitation imposed upon our own basic faith-experience. While holding on to the specificity of our faith which is ultimately a gift, a sacred trust we have received from God through Christ, we have to transcend the inherent limitations of the same in our orientation to the ineffable mystery of God. It is this sense of transcendence that renders us ultimately free

and leads us to further exploration of our own faith-experience through dialogue with other religions. A true spirit of dialogue emerging from the spirit of transcendence, therefore, refuses to identify our faith-experience in Christ with any articulation of the same, although such articulations are natural in the process of thinking and reflecting on the basic mystery of the faith-experience. The depth-dimension of the unarticulated in one's own faith is often brought to light by the challenging presence of the partner in dialogue. It is therefore with an awareness of limitations of our own faith-experience and its expressions and sense of admiration of what is being revealed in the other, that we now begin to look at the other religions. This outlook leads us to a new approach to a theology of religions.

19. This theology, seen from the perspective of dialogue, is a theology of openness to the inexhaustible mystery of the divine self-manifestation. Since the Christian faith is an experience of this divine self-communication to us in and through the person of Jesus the Christ, this theology, in all fidelity accepts the reality of Christ and its all-pervading role in shaping the life of a Christian. However, since Christ is experienced as one who denies himself on the cross in his unconditional surrender to the Father, this theology of religions gives us the vision and courage to transcend the inherent limitations of God's self-communication through Jesus Christ. We therefore do not claim any kind of ultimacy for any of the articulations of our own faith-experience nor do we deny the role of such statements in the course of history of a lived faith. Keeping our hearts attached to the Christ-event in this way and at the same time throwing our minds open to the vast and ineffable mystery of God communicated to us through Christ, our Christian approach to other religions becomes one of hopeful listening to the other and of humble sharing of our own selves. In this process it is natural that we get transformed as we enter deeper and deeper into the hidden mysteries of our own faith-experience where the specificity of our faith opens up and leads us to a wider and more universal experience of God who is the Saviour of all and who alone knows the ultimate mystery of salvation of all people. We thus recognize ourselves as pilgrims in Christ, but at the

same time making our holy pilgrimage of life along with many others to that fullness of truth which is beyond all claims of expression and possession.

20. In this great pilgrimage of humanity, each one's religion is a source of strength and plays a vital role by providing wholeness to one's broken existence and hope to one's search for truth. As harbingers of this freedom, wholeness and hope all these religions participate in that 'Great Religion' which can never be totally identified with any of its expressions, though all of them are manifestations of it in one way or another.

Interculturation and theology of religious pluralism

21. We use a new word *interculturation* to express our conviction that there is a mutual fecundation in the dialogal experience of pluralism. Religion and culture are so closely related that religion can be called the soul of culture, and culture gives religion its language. In any open and creative encounter between two religions/cultures there takes place a natural symbiosis which we call interculturation.

22. Interculturation comes from the praxis of sincerely living together, i. e., entering into the human community without reservation, fears or mistrust. It amounts to an acceptance of other communities inasmuch as we establish a fellowship with them. Religions are hindrances for that fellowship as well as the means to reach a communion in depth which transcends superficial exchanges and transactions.

23. A conscious interculturation implies not only adopting external features of the other, but accepting the *mythos* of the other inasmuch as we succeed in establishing a cultural symbiosis. Interculturation is not a religiously neutral act but it radically challenges both partners inviting them to a new self-understanding which is a continuous process of reinterpretation.

24. Interculturation has profound theological implications. It demands a genuine dialogue with members of other religious communities, implies a common sharing in a liberative praxis even if not identically interpreted, and changes our own self-understanding, overcoming our watertight exclusivisms. Likewise it demands a similar attitude from the other side, and

leads to a mutual fecundation of ideas and new community of praxis. However, it has to reckon with mistrust and resistance from those who would wish to keep the religious *status quo* in static immobility; and hence it has to take into account the danger of artificial eclecticism, shalow syncretism and hurried imitations.

Our vision of Christ and theology of religious pluralism

25. In this pilgrimage we are sustained by the Spirit of Christ who has preceded us to Galilee (Mt 28:10). Journeying with him as disciples to the Father, we are faced with the challenge of articulating a theology of religious pluralism. We need a vision of Christ which will inspire us to commit ourselves to this task.

26. We look at Christ as one who, by emptying himself, takes us to the ineffable mystery of God. His *kenosis* signifies a 'not clinging to' his divine status (Phil 2:6). It was an act of unconditional surrender to the Father. It was a presence in submission to His Father's universal salvific will. Christ accepted the human condition to the ultimate consequences. He gave himself totally to others; he did not hesitate to set aside even some of the religious convictions of his people in order to be faithful to his mission. This led him to the final expression of *kenosis*, namely, the death on the cross, consecrated by the resurrection and symbolized in the eucharist.

27 The kenotic Christ is present in every human vicissitude as servant and leaven. He belongs to the whole of humanity. Through this servanthood he gives himself incessantly to men and women of all cultures and leads them unobtrusively to their self-realisation. His is a liberative action which makes the person whole, transforms the cultures it encounters by forming them into a community of love in which the other is respected and accepted in his or her self-understanding.

28. This is the Christ we experience in our faith. We are however aware of the fact that as we express our faith by affirming the uniqueness of Christ (*ephapax*), there are also claims to uniqueness on the part of other religions. This indeed poses a problem to us in our dialogue with other religions. To respond creatively to this problem some have suggested a theocentric interpretation of the Christian faith rather than

a Christocentric one. Others, however, feel that this would deprive Christianity of its specificity. Therefore we would rather approach the issue from a different perspective. Christ is constitutively the Way to the Father and as such he is theocentric. But to one who is on the Way, the Way is also the goal.

29. In our approach to religions we follow this Christ who responds to the Father, and is with the members of all religions in their journey towards the Absolute. Indeed, we do find in our country, persons belonging to other faiths, who have experienced and expressed Christ as Way to the Absolute.

30. Moreover, in the existential struggles of the masses of our country, people look for a Way that could lead them to the fullness of life. Christ himself had to face such struggles and even today he is fully involved in them.

31. The discipleship of such a Christ demands from us a *metanoia*. The consequences of this discipleship will require from us a greater openness to all humanity. When this happens, other religions will no longer pose a threat to us; rather they will offer us a greater opportunity to express our own commitment in a richer and more meaningful way. (This will enable us to build up one community of hope with diverse expressions of response to the Transcendent.

32. The religions of the world are expressions of the human openness to God. They are signs of God's presence in the world. Every religion is unique and through this uniqueness, religions enrich one another. In their specificity, they manifest different faces of that supreme Mystery which is never exhausted. In their diversity, they enable us to experience the richness of the One more profoundly. When religions encounter one another in dialogue, they build up a community in which differences become complementarities and divergences are changed into pointers to communion.

33. This self-same encounter should serve as a corrective which helps religions break out of their shell of egoism, assertiveness and dogmatism which are deformations in every religion. Our theology of religions can emerge only from a healthy interaction which involves both the sharing of experiences and the critique of expressions.

34. Since no religious language can adequately express the

Mystery, we accept the reality of different languages which may not always fall in line with our own expressions and patterns of thought. This calls for the cultivation of a deep-seated respect for religious expressions other than our own. Any attitude of dogmatic absolutism is contrary to the true spirit of religion.

35. Our theology of religions will go one step further when we positively accept other religions — a positive acceptance which does not necessarily mean an intellectual agreement but which manifests itself in a shared praxis which should take place at various levels. This endeavour calls for an attitude of constant listening to one another, persevering involvement and patient watching. What sustains us in this endeavour is our hope.

36. No religion can exist in isolation; nay more, a religion that is not open to the other becomes irreligious as exemplified in fundamentalism and religious fanaticism. In a pluralistic society like ours, genuine religion essentially entails a relationship to other religions and should be lived as such. In short, to be religious is to be inter-religious.

Conclusion

37. Our effort to evolve a theology of religious pluralism has far-reaching consequences for the Christian community and for ourselves. The Church in India has to acquire a renewed awareness of her mission as servant and leaven, as community that can transcend its institutional identity in order to build up a community of hope in which all men and women of goodwill can find a meaningful existence as they struggle towards total liberation. The identity of the Christian community, like that of Christ, the man-for-the-other and the man-with-the-other, will be in its relatedness to the rest of the human community. It will be able to find the One in the midst of the many as He who illumines and unfolds the ineffable riches of the religious heritage with which the Spirit of the Lord has endowed our land. "All things shine with the shining of this light.

The wholeworld reflects its radiance."³

Foot Notes

1. Secretariat for Non-Christians, "The Attitude of the Church towards the Followers of Other Religions", in *Bulletin of Secretariat for Non-Christians*, 56 (1984), p. 137, n. 30.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 136, n. 29.
3. *Katha Upanishad*, V. 15.

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